

Das Unheimliche: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Art of Introspection

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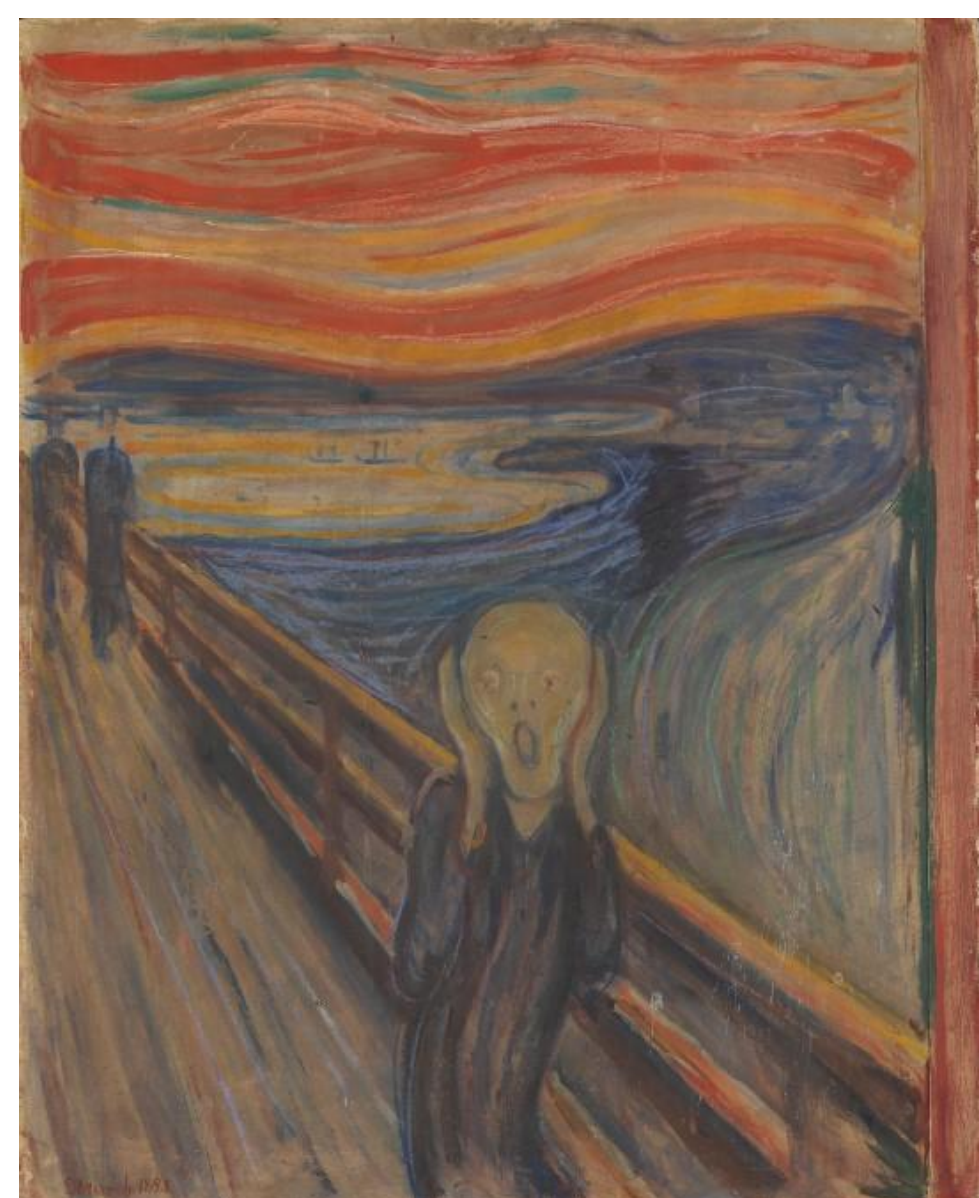
Project Overview

'Das Unheimliche', while promulgated as a scientific concept by the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud during the early twentieth-century, transcended this temporal boundary as a state of mind. Throughout the preceding century, both Romantic and Symbolist writers and artists had been similarly fascinated by the obscurities of human psychology: the irrational, the inexplicable and the 'uncanny'. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Surrealists responded to Freud's ideas on the subconscious, and their works celebrating the irrational in man were largely in conversation with their Symbolist predecessors. Treating Freud's 'uncanny' as, indeed, the "feeling-of-other-presence" (see right) I explore the similarities between the movements' engagement with the uncanny otherness, not merely of identity, but also the nature of appearances, gender, race and meaning itself.



Henry Fuseli
The Nightmare c.1781-2
Oil on canvas
© Detroit Institute of the Arts

"In this primitive that modern man bears within, to which surrealism gives expression, the uncanny [l'insolite] unleashes the 'feeling-of-other-presence'." – Jules Monnerot¹



Edvard Munch
The Scream, 1893
Oil, tempera, pastel and crayon on cardboard
National Museum, Oslo, Online Collection

Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, 1919:

- "The uncanny is in some way a species of familiar"²
- While the terms 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' suggest opposition, for Freud, their semantic connotations overlap (i.e. – heimlich, although meaning 'homely; familiar', also connotes that which is 'private; concealed', thus imbricating with a translation of 'unheimlich')
- As such, the feeling of the uncanny (English equivalent to 'unheimlich') is one of fear
- Whilst originating as something of extreme familiarity, through the individual's own act of repression, the familiar ('heimlich') becomes and, later, resurfaces as something estranged and 'unheimlich'

Key tropes of the Uncanny:

- The double – identification with another, the split self, mirror images, repetitions, shadows
- Challenging the nature of normative experience and perception, namely, an uncertainty towards whether something falls into the realm of one's inner, psychological experience or the material, external world
- Uncertain liminality between life/death; the animate/inanimate; reality/fantasy

The Uncanny meets the Sublime:

- Exploring the parallels between Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (one of the foundational texts of the Romantic movement) and Freud's *Das Unheimliche*
- In their alike attempts to discard familiar patterns of thought and perceptual experience, both Romantics and Symbolists began to engage with ideas that would only later be defined by Freud
- For both Freud's and Burke's theories, fear and terror occupy central positions
- The sublime can be inferred as an intermediary force, eliciting sensations of fear and obscurity and martialling the process by which 'Heim' becomes 'unheimlich'
- How does this relate to Munch's portraits (see left)? → In its capacity to render the soul motionless and to obscure one's sense of being and place, the Sublime transcends its traditional status as an externally-charged phenomenon and becomes located within man's *inner* landscape
- Munch's portraits reveal the unheimlich 'other' self; familiarity of both self and space is rendered obsolete

"The uncanny looms like a hint, like a signal from otherness [...] reminds us that reality is only one side" – Walter Schurian³

A proto-Surrealist Vision?

- Heralded by the Symbolists for its indirect meaning and suggestive potential, the 'symbol' is exemplary of the Freudian uncanny 'other'
- The pioneer of the Surrealist movement's, Andre Breton, principal notion of the "marvellous" (the uncanny sensation evoked by the unexpected juxtaposition of two unrelated entities) is arguably an extension of the Symbolist fascination with the emotive potential offered by the duplicitous and malleable meaning of a symbol⁴
- Meaning itself becomes 'unheimlich' → normative and familiar modes of understanding are estranged

The Unheimlich Persona: Surrealist Photographic Portraiture

- Extending the Romantic's attack on Enlightenment singular vision and individualistic notions of self, the Surrealists formulated a philosophy of identity governed by the idea of an 'otherness' to one's self
- Such views were intimately aligned with the movement's anti-Imperialist views and admiration for non-Western 'primitive' cultures
- While for many contemporaries, the non-Western sphere signified that which was unfamiliar and to be feared – 'unheimlich', the Surrealist desire to reconnect with the 'primitive' innate within man promoted the interconnection between self and 'other'

Historical and Contemporary Influences:

- G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) questioned the human consummation of self-knowledge, or 'self-consciousness', by confronting ideas on the authenticity, as well as otherness, of self⁵
- Such knowledge, for Hegel, was dependent upon the individual's realising their own fundamental relation with 'an other' → self and other become mutually defining
- According to Carl Jung (one of Freud's students), "every man carries a woman within himself"⁶ → such a view encapsulates how the Surrealist notion of the relation between self and other applied to both gender and race
- Man's inner female, therefore, became paradigmatic of 'Das Unheimliche', a familiar, but repressed, aspect of the psyche.

Claude Cahun
Self-Portrait, 1928
Photograph
Jersey Heritage Collection



Conclusion

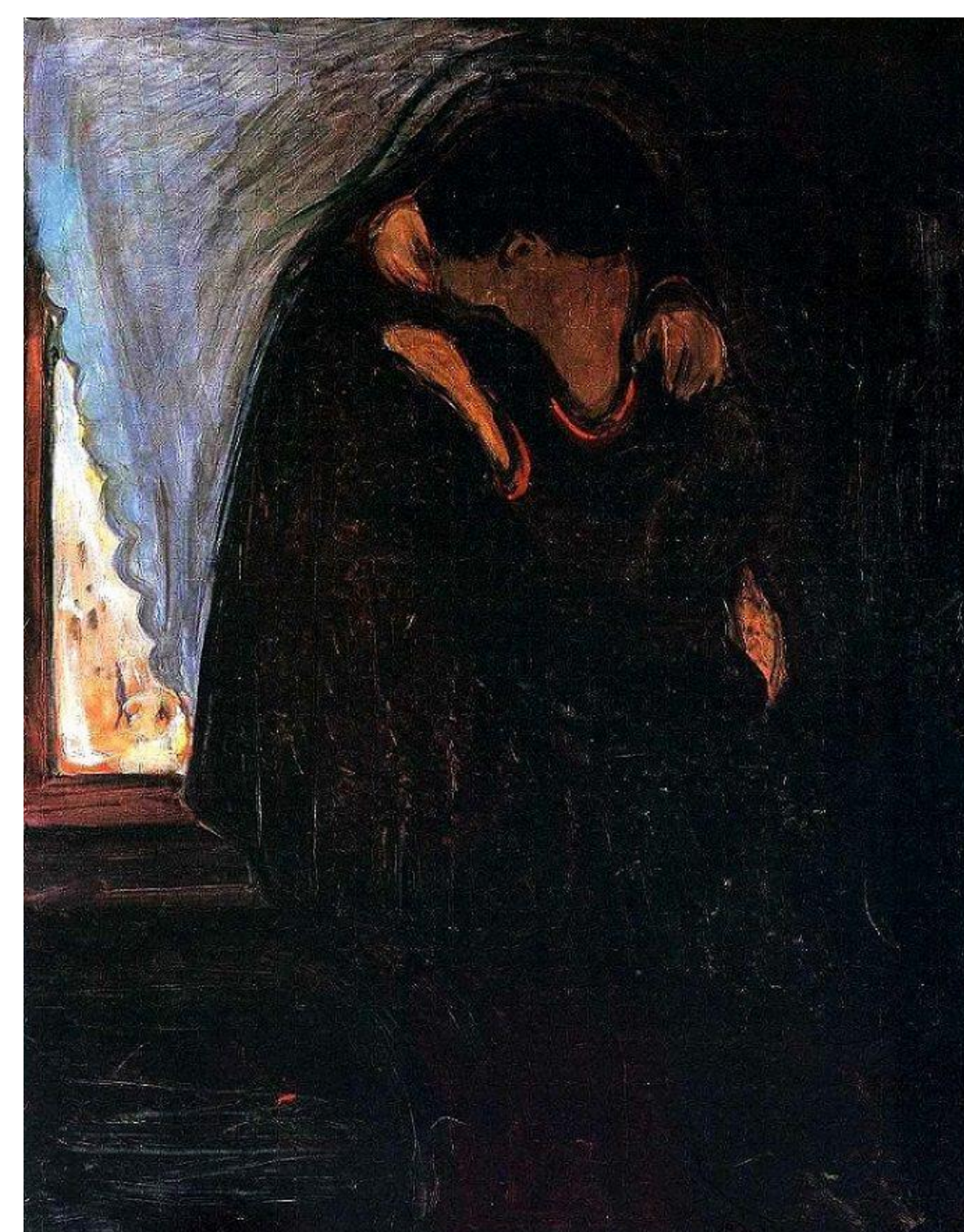
While Freud's concept *Das Unheimliche* was governed by the utilitarian purpose to explain the condition of modern man, Symbolists and Surrealists ultimately sought to transcend such a scientific approach as a matter of finite explanation. As a platform for exploring something's 'otherness', the uncanny became a tool to extend the Romantics' attack on Enlightened singular vision. The concept augmented one's experiences by providing a realm of expanded possibility, encouraging the modern subject to broaden their scope of otherwise familiar perception. Indeed, as has been suggested, 'Das Unheimliche' resists explanation – through art, however, it can be *felt*.

References:

- ¹ Jules Monnerot, 'L'Insolite', in *La Poesie moderne et le sacre*, quoted in Michael Stone-Richards, 'The Chance Encounter: Language, and Madness', in Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, *Surrealism: Key Concepts* (London, Routledge, 2016), p.154
- ² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York, Penguin Books, 2003), p.134
- ³ Walter Schurian, 'Perceptions of the Uncanny', in Michael Fuhr and Rudolf Leopold, *Edvard Munch und das Unheimliche* (Leopold Museum, C. Brandstatter, 2009), p.299
- ⁴ CHECK
- ⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by J.B. Baillie (London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1910), pp.164-66
- ⁶ Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (New York, Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1964), p.31

Unheimlich Self; Unheimlich Space: Visualising the literary Gothic

- Freud's concept of the estranged 'Heim', referring to the sensation of unfamiliarity in both oneself and one's surroundings, powerfully echoes the Gothic literary idea of setting as psychic allegory
- Through the works of Edvard Munch and Eugène Carrière, Freud's *Das Unheimliche* is remarkably anticipated
- Both artists explore the mutually defining relation between psychological and physical states of existence
- Both of the above works, entitled 'The Kiss', estrange and distort familiar scenes of romantic or familial communion → through the unnatural bodily contortion, all sense of intimacy, individuality and 'heim' is dissolved as the figures conjoin into an abstracted uncanny whole



Edvard Munch
The Kiss, 1897
Oil on canvas
Munch Museum, Oslo



Eugène Carrière
Le Baiser (The Kiss),
Oil on Canvas
Sotheby's



Man Ray
Erotique Voilee (Meret Oppenheim a la presse) (Veiled Erotic (Meret Oppenheim at the press)), 1933
Photograph
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