

Editor's Introduction: Aesthetics of the Uncanny

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Eye-gouging is one of the most gruesome tropes of the uncanny. A terrifying specter, it recurs across genres, from horror films to Gothic literature to Freudian psychoanalysis. Zombies are abject precisely because they have “turned” and are no longer recognizable—their eyes have sunk away and are unable to see, either themselves or their beloveds. Eye-gouging fascinated Freud ([1919] 1999) too, as detailed in his essay “The Uncanny,” where he psychoanalyzes E. T. A. Hoffmann’s 1816 short story “The Sandman.” Instead of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale about magic sand bringing sweet dreams to children, Hoffmann, whom Freud described as the unrivalled literary master of the uncanny, built on darker versions of the story. There, Sandman threatens sleepless children, throwing burning sand on their open eyes and plucking out their eyeballs. Freud ([1919] 1999: 241) predictably equated such anxieties over the loss of sight with the fear of cas-

tration and declared eye-gouging to be generalized “anxiety . . . from something repressed which *recurs*,” adding that “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.” Freud thereby linked societal repression to mass dislocation and trauma under conditions of rapid industrialization and war, which were especially pronounced at his time of writing.

A hundred years later, the centenary of Freud’s 1919 essay on the uncanny coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as museums celebrated the paper’s impact on psychoanalytic and aesthetic theories, the uncanny became in reality a mounting death toll when modern medicine’s interventions seemed to no avail.¹ The question remains: with the uncanny’s return in 2019, what do we do when we no longer trust what we see, when we have lost self-possession and control? Commentaries have tried to historicize the pandemic, make it familiar, and draw parallels to the “Spanish flu” of a century ago. But pandemics had remained squarely the stuff of science fiction until 2019, when COVID-19 surged with eerie simultaneity into the mundane and the extraordinary. Life seemed to go on as always, even as millions died; air cleared of pollution and wild animals roamed streets left emptied of people, as body bags piled up in the city center. Meanwhile, the privileged few ensconced on yachts and in their villas continued to accumulate vast amounts of wealth, safe in their hideouts, even as the world around them drowned in tragedy. Though not literally gouged, our eyes turned to disaster porn—pleasure and displeasure indistinguishable in the Lacanian view of our lives.

In his ruminations on the uncanny, Freud unpacks the double meaning inscribed in the German term for canny, *heimlich*—familiar and homely, or concealed and private—to suggest that the uncanny is the psychic manifestation of bourgeois ideology itself. Its distinction between “public” and “private” spheres not only hides the exploitation behind privatized accumulation of wealth but suppresses needs and desires in the name of morality and social order. Aesthetic movements in Freud’s time gave expression to this duplicity at the heart of the uncanny by shifting aesthetics from conventional beauty and the sublime to the grotesque and the profane. Such negative aesthetics of the uncanny served as a dialectical critique, a theme taken up by several contributors to this issue of *positions*.

Like the double meaning of *heimlich, sujet humain* (human subject) means both submission to and agent of authority. Subjectivity is therefore bound in a dialectic of what it means to be a person both created and creator, historically and politically contingent. This subject-object bind recurs through eye-gouging in the 2001 South Korean film *Address Unknown* (수취인 불명) directed by Kim Ki-duk. In it, Eun-ok stabs herself in the eye, rejecting the sight given to her through her relations with a Korea-stationed US soldier in a quid pro quo exchange of sex for surgery. Like Oedipus self-castrating as punishment for fornicating with his mother, Eun-ok blinds herself as abject, rejecting collusion with US empire.² Likewise, dystopian reality in films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Matrix* (1999) makes eyes useless and indeed requires their abandonment.

Given the place of automatons in exposing the uncanny, from Olympia in the “The Sandman” to Rachel in *Blade Runner*, it should come as no surprise that a pioneer of robotics penned an influential 1970 essay titled “The Uncanny Valley” (“Bukimi no tani” 不気味の谷) (Mori 2012). Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori (森政弘, b. 1927) argues that in approaching the goal of making robots appear more human, our affinity for them progressively increases until a sharp plunge into what he calls the “uncanny valley.” When robots appear and behave too lifelike, subtle imperfections elicit a sense of profound unease. No wonder that ChatGPT has provoked such fascination and alarm this year. Mori (2012: 100) understands the eeriness as “a form of instinct that protects us from proximal, rather than distal, sources of danger.” While Mori here is differentiating close-encounter dangers, like violence and disease, from more “distant” dangers, like windstorms and floods, the frequency of environmental disasters would seem to have made both forms of dangers eerily close. We are indeed knee-deep in the valley of the uncanny.

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The articles in this issue of *positions* came together by coincidence. They never intended in their original design to be collected in one volume, but they share uncanny parallels nonetheless. How can this not be symptomatic of their authors' times? Tim Shao-Hung Teng opens the issue with a return to eye-gouging. Lu Xun's 1925 essay “On Photography,” Teng argues, shows

how modern visual techniques assembled colonial violence through both the “representation of violence and the violence of representation” mythologized in Lu Xun’s own encounter with the “magic lantern slide” of decapitation in 1906. Rather than focusing on Lu Xun’s biography, however, Teng approaches his essay as an archaeological site of media excavation to draw out a history of eye-gouging. One common trope comes out of folklore about “foreign devils” pickling eyeballs. In Teng’s hands, media archaeology opens dissonance between the totalizing universal gaze of modern media technology and the particular experiences of what this meant in local contexts. As he argues, missionary photographs are black magic, an optical proselytizing instrument that co-opts and dispossess native souls. Disembodiment proved essential in the rise of visual modernity. Now screens proliferate, eyes in the form of smartphones transforming us all into spectator-spectacle (subject-object). This historical ubiquity of screen-eyes, or what Teng calls the “eye-camera,” collapses the distance between our “eyeballs,” or screen-eyes, meaning we constantly view, surveil, and exponentially judge our own impotence.

Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg, complementing Teng’s media archaeology, examine body art to interrogate the post-1978 avant-garde and popular culture as arenas of both self-expression and alienation. Body art, as the authors explain, is the “use of the human body as the primary material of artistic creation and the performance of actions of cruelty, modification and endangerment on the artist’s body”; “by adopting the languages of violence and aggression, such art offers allegories of social and political polemics.” As a negative aesthetics, body art emerged in China between the late 1980s and early 2000s, recalling the rupture of the 1920s–1930s in Lu Xun’s time of intense anxiety about Chinese modernity. Through the work of Yang Zhichao, body art returns to the subject-object bind by centering the double-edged condition of postsocialism as dystopian and dehumanizing, and yet with renewed potential for experimentation and reinvention. Known for working with marginalized “floating populations” such as beggars, vagrants, refugees, and other migrants without urban household registration, Yang tackles the psychiatric ward in *Jiayu Pass* (1999–2000) to become a patient himself. Lu Xun’s 1918 “A Madman’s Diary,” Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” and Yang’s *Jiayu Pass* blur all distinctions between sanity

and madness and expose the modern condition. But Yang seeks an alternative to the familiar European trope of madness-as-illness and offers madness as a “simultaneously biological, emotional, supernatural and moral issue.”

“Floating populations” are never limited by national borders, and Nora Hui-Jung Kim tracks how the post–Cold War celebration of “multiculturalism” in South Korea has erased the longer history of Vietnamese refugees in Korea. As part of the subimperial nation-building project, South Korea sent the second largest military ground force to join the US war in Vietnam. With the end of the war, South Korea evacuated Koreans and their families from Vietnam, giving priority to Vietnamese wives and offspring of Koreans. Infantilizing and feminizing Vietnamese refugees as “backward” and in need of rescue, only the Vietnamese wives and children of Korean men were provided residency and citizenship (contingent on maintaining these family ties), even though they were the minority of Vietnamese refugees. South Korea’s first experience with internationally recognized refugees thus occurred because of the Vietnam War. Yet South Korea would only sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention in 1992, as the last of the Vietnamese refugees departed and the remaining refugee camp in Busan closed. In continuity with earlier policy, the South Korean government’s multiculturalism in the post–Cold War era targets Vietnamese brides, who constitute over a quarter of all marriage migrants in South Korea today. Meanwhile, vast numbers of migrant workers must return to their countries of origin after a few years of work, relegating them to peripheral and temporary status. As Kim forcefully concludes, “It is through the work of forgetting the Vietnam War and erasing the Vietnamese refugees that South Korea introduces itself as a welcoming host, free of historical guilt or responsibility.” Rather than the empty rhetoric of multiculturalism as a “feel-good celebration of ethnic diversity,” Kim demands nothing short of historical reckoning.

Like multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism may appear on its surface to be a superficial attempt to transcend cultural and national boundaries, but Kenny K. K. Ng recuperates the radical potential of cosmopolitanism by looking at local adaptations of world classics as a form of “cosmopolitanism from below.” Here, “minoritarian cosmopolitans” without national belonging or economic status, such as refugees, exiles, migrants, and the diaspora, take center stage. Examining Cantonese 1950s filmic adaptations of such

works as *Great Expectations*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Sister Carrie*, Ng shows how the Cantonese Union Film Enterprise strategically used Hong Kong's embattled position at the intersection of Cold War blocs to fuse inspirations from May Fourth literature critical of feudal family relations with Hollywood melodrama in favor of individual love and freedom. Eschewing the hierarchies of capitalist film companies, however, Union Film ran a cooperative enterprise to promote collective creative processes that drew on Chinese folk stories. While adaptations of Dickens, Tolstoy, and Dreiser may seem anathema to such a project, the appeal to "world classics" lent prestige to Cantonese films, while melodrama provided a familiar genre to criticize both colonial capitalist exploitation and women's patriarchal oppression. Substantially reworking the original novels, the adaptations signaled not only aesthetic experimentation but also alternative political praxes at the height of the Cold War. A bottom-up cosmopolitanism sought ways to bridge the divide through the Union Film's dictum, "all for one and one for all."

The last two ethnographic essays in this issue address what it means for a city like Beijing or Shanghai to be cosmopolitan in ways that paradoxically both expand and limit their horizons. Linking Bakhtin's philosophy of language with Fanon's postcolonial critique, Jay Ke-Schutte examines present-day articulations of language, identity, and place in China to show how the more common language of "Afro-Asian solidarities" from the heyday of Maoism has given way to "postcolonial nightmares," in which the only available mode of connection is through English-language-mediated cosmopolitan aspirations. Ke-Schutte draws on "semiotic practices, media landscapes, and conditions of mobility as integrated, contrapuntal phenomena," in this case, centered on contemporary African students in Beijing. The question Ke-Schutte poses, "What is it like to be an African student in Beijing?" is just one articulation of many other possibilities. Interested in "non-Western modalities of intersubjective personhood," Ke-Schutte's particular dimensions of the question can be generalized to ask, What kind of political subjectivity is possible in the era of globalization? If English has become a common currency that lubricates cosmopolitan interactions the world over, and yet is susceptible to heteroglossia and therefore disrupt-

tion like any other language, then what are the possibilities for a linguistic equivalent to cryptocurrency to disrupt the Angloscene? Might the emergence of blockchain technology be symptomatic of just such a turn, in which digital codes and computerized language take over? Like Ng's "cosmopolitanism from below" in which Cantonese adaptations of world classics render them cosmopolitan rather than "Western" per se, the Sino-South encounters may enable much more than Angloscene even as this interaction is dependent upon English as a form of cultural capital.

Such contested semiotics also manifest in physical spaces. As Gerda Wielder shows in her walking ethnography, ongoing struggles over material meaning-making are visible in the different remnants of *danwei* (work unit) walls that were once part of socialist urban planning between the 1950s and 1980s. Enclosing distinct compounds of work units and their residences, each *danwei* "functioned simultaneously as unit of production and of social control; they played a crucial role in the distribution of urban welfare and specific rights of citizenship." The walls were a source of isolation and obstacle, on the one hand, but protection, status, and identity, on the other. Now, the walls have become physical manifestations of postsocialism itself in the different ways that local communities have accommodated to the changes. Some have incorporated the walls into new living spaces, while others have torn them down to make way for fences, and still others stubbornly try to hang on to them as the last vestiges of community. Rather than displaying socialist propaganda, walls may become "urban culture walls" through the mobilization of local residents in arts and crafts classes, or the walls might perform anonymous dissent, displaying spray-painted messages that are daily whitewashed, the erasure itself a visible sign of contestation. As ephemeral signs continuously reworked, *danwei* are yet another uncanny trace of the ghosts of socialism in China, an indication that the past is never foreclosed no matter the fixation with prefixes like *post-*.

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As noted at the outset, the six articles in this volume were gathered serendipitously, but collectively they speak to our uncanny present. For me, their cumulative intervention shifts from the uncanny to creativity, whether

in art and politics or in interpersonal encounters and communal projects. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Horace Walpole coined the term *serendipity* in 1754, when he got the idea from reading the fairy tale “The Three Princes of Serendip,” in which the heroes “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.”³ It is a happy coincidence that the first general issue for which I have the pleasure of writing the introduction should deploy the aesthetics of the uncanny. The role of editor has many peaks and valleys, as shown in my conversation with Tani Barlow, the last contribution to this issue, to mark the journal’s first transition after its founding thirty years ago. As *positions* settles into the next phase of its many iterations, I hope that discoveries and quests not always planned lead to many more serendipitous outcomes. That is how Moriyama’s photograph featured on the cover came to my attention just as I began working on this introduction. Some three decades after the photograph was taken, Moriyama reflected, “I am still, to this day, left with the impression of the signage for an optician’s clinic which had profusely caught my eye.”⁴ It caught my eye too.

Notes

- 1 For an example of a museum exhibit on the centenary of “The Uncanny,” see the Freud Museum London’s exhibit at <https://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/the-uncanny-a-centenary/>.
- 2 Despite Kim Ki-duk’s reputation, as a controversial auteur, for excessive violence in his films, especially against women, nuanced readings of his work as embracing radical heterogeneity and centering the oppressed subaltern include Choe 2007 and Chung 2010.
- 3 “Word of the Day: Serendipity,” *Merriam-Webster*, February 13, 2013, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day/serendipity-2014-02-13>.
- 4 See Taka Ishii Gallery exhibition of Daido Moriyama “Tsugaru” (November 27–December 18, 2010), <https://www.takaishiigallery.com/en/archives/2516/> (accessed March 27, 2023).

References

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