

*The Sentient Stage: The Theatrical Uncanny in Contemporary Performance*

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## ABSTRACT

### *The Sentient Stage: The Theatrical Uncanny in Contemporary Performance*

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This dissertation identifies and explores a genre of performance I term the “theatrical uncanny.” Intermingling aesthetics and psychology, the uncanny is the realm of “intellectual uncertainty” (for Ernst Jentsch) and “the familiar made strange” (for Sigmund Freud); it is an obscure but palpable disruption of our expectations. The genre of the uncanny has received a great deal of scholarly attention in both film and literature, but has, by contrast, been minimally explored in performance. This neglect is particularly striking considering theatre itself can be viewed as inherently uncanny. The repetitions and representations of performance, its interdependence of the real and the imaginary, imply a kind of ever-present déjà vu. The very pervasiveness of this quality can in fact render it insensible. The genre of uncanny performance is therefore a valuable designation for works that actively elicit this psycho-emotional response. The productions I study are remarkable for their ability to capitalize on theatre’s uncanny potential.

I demonstrate that this category of performance is not limited to any particular style or status, locating the effect as potently in popular entertainments (such as the junk opera *Shockheaded Peter* and punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*) as in more esoteric or avant-garde work (like that of artists such as the Quay Brothers and Tadeusz Kantor). Drawing on a variety of methods – including phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science – I engage with these performances as sensual experience. Through subjective impression and extensive description, I gradually elucidate the scenographic parameters of the theatrical uncanny. The productions that achieve this effect, while greatly disparate in nature, share certain approaches and techniques in common. They position the spectator (physically, emotionally,

perceptually) in an unstable relationship to the objects and bodies of the performance, creating the sensation that the inanimate actually possesses its own unique vitality. Uncanny performance interweaves elements of object theatre, memory theatre, and intermediality, but cannot be encompassed by any of these terms in isolation. These performances question our basic qualifications for declaring something 'live,' as the term is used both theoretically and colloquially. They ask what it would mean for a memory to behave as an object, or for an object to have memories.

This study is both a critique of how the uncanny works on stage and an attempt to rethink the concept of the uncanny through theatre practice. I argue that the uncanny is best understood as an embodied experience, a feeling mediated through and registered within our flesh. It results from unsettling interactions between our bodies and the matter and space around us. The concrete and present spatial relationships of theatre are ideal for exploring these tensions. Through the materiality of theatre, I offer evidence that the uncanny response, rather than being a marginal or naïve interpretation of the world (as it is sometimes portrayed), is actually a fundamental and profoundly productive state of mind.

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## DEDICATION

*To my beloved children Lucas, Carolina, and Liam Pereira. I began this dissertation before any of you were born, but in many ways, I could never have written it without you. I became pregnant with the eldest of you while working on my first chapter, and completed the coda while nine months pregnant with the youngest. Becoming your mother has been a profoundly uncanny journey, combining intimate familiarity with thrilling surprises. Thank you for filling my life with the extraordinary in the everyday.*



## *INTRODUCTION*

I have a memory, which quite possibly may also have been a dream. I am four or five, playing in my backyard in the sepia light of late afternoon and early childhood. I'm holding a small blue marble. I find a drainpipe underneath a hydrangea bush – a small circle of perfect blackness within the shadowy afternoon. I remember a feeling of surprise that the drain would be there – I couldn't quite understand its purpose, or recall if I had ever seen it before. I drop the marble into its darkness (On purpose? By accident? The motivation is unclear...) and wait. It disappears into the void, and I hear nothing – not the sound of the marble bouncing against the sides of the pipe, not the thud of it hitting bottom somewhere below, just nothing. The marble had fallen into the pipe and off the edge of the world.

The pipe is no longer there – that is, of course, if it ever actually was. But the memory is real, as is the emotion it evokes. I remember a simultaneous terror and thrill at the possibility of this backyard black hole, tucked away beneath a hydrangea bush. In that moment, whether real or imagined, I confronted infinity and the eternal for the first time and felt the absolute incompatibility of such concepts with the humility of a garden drainpipe. It seemed that both the marble and the drainpipe had access to knowledge – to an understanding of the world that I could strive for, but never fully attain.

Several decades have passed since I lost that plaything into an abyss below my parents' lawn. And in that time, I have been able to give a name to what I experienced – it was uncanny. The uncanny, essentially, is the familiar made strange, or the strange rendered familiar. My childhood home, a space of complete comfort and intimacy, became in that moment entirely foreign. And the realm of infinite space, as unimaginable a concept as that might seem for a five year old, became a coherent element of my domestic landscape. I begin

my dissertation with this perhaps alarmingly personal anecdote in part because it is the origin of my interest in the uncanny, but also because it illustrates, rather neatly, the main parameters of my investigation. It demonstrates how the uncanny entangles not just the familiar and the strange, but the working of space and time, dreams and memory, past and present.

I often think back to that afternoon, and that immense silence. I sift the colors of it in my brain, looking for hints as to whether it was dream or reality. The memory itself has become contained, polished and smoothed over by regular handling, till it resembles the very marble I held in my hand. The vivid images of the scene are surrounded on all sides by their own darkness, by the oblivion of what I have forgotten – what I was doing beforehand, what happened afterwards. If I try to remember the surrounding context, the memory slips away into the chasm of the unconscious. In isolation, the scene plays and replays in a tiny jewel-box theatre of memory, edged on all sides by an unknown blackness waiting in the wings.

It is not by accident that recalling this memory conjures up images of a theatre, one in which my past plays out selected scenes for a rather limited audience. The uncanny adheres to certain spatial relationships – the realm of the concealed, the behind and the underneath, which correspond to the configuration of a theatre. The relationship goes beyond metaphor. The spatial model aligns not only with the event, but also, logically, with the experience of that event in the mind. As we navigate and process a phenomenon of the uncanny, the corresponding mental activity implies an interaction between light and dark, seen and unseen, above and below – the language of theatrical space.<sup>1</sup> And it is here, within the theatre, that I

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<sup>1</sup> Theatre, of course, has a history of representing our minds. The model has to a certain extent been rejected in a post-Cartesian world, at least as a method for depicting consciousness. Jay Ingram explores this concept in his book by the same name – *The Theater of the Mind* – and surveys its history and development. He neatly demonstrates the challenges of

pursue my fascination with the uncanny – to expose what the uncanny tells us about performance, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to reveal what performance discovers about the uncanny.

This childhood moment, real or imagined, dreamed or lived, fixed itself in my mind because of the power and complexity of its emotional contours. In recalling it, I can still feel the shiver that accompanied the moment in which reality contradicted my beliefs. This tension is in fact, an alternate formulation of the uncanny – an experience that does not align with one’s expectations for reality. The uncanny is generated when what we expect to take place significantly does not, forcing us to then reevaluate our entire understanding of the world. Cognitive science calls such disruptive moments “prediction errors” – moments that defy our mental model for the world. These errors go far beyond mere frustration or disappointment. They are not the small disturbances of expecting it to rain and encountering a sunny day. They are the sorts of errors that upset our understanding of the world – in which what we believe to be rain turns out to be the showering web-threads of a freak spider-storm.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, these errors, while disturbing at a basic level, are actually generative and productive at the cognitive level. The uncanny challenges our fundamental beliefs about how

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taking this idea too literally. The idea of a “theatre of the mind” having a specific location in the brain where a “homunculus” witnesses the play of consciousness is indeed, difficult to accept (Ingram 12). But the lack of a literal mental theatre however does not invalidate its aptitude as a model for our mental landscape. The uncanny breeds in the unstable intersection of the conscious and unconscious, the very interaction that Ingram suggests we experience as a kind of “staging”. Considering how often theatre is referenced to understand our minds metaphorically, pursuing some of these questions of consciousness in actual performance seems particularly appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Such spider storms – though seemingly the stuff of science fiction or pure horror, do in fact occur. And while paralyzing for those who suffer from arachnophobia (myself included), the experience cries out for explanation. Sarah Kaplan of the Washington Post recounts such a storm that took place in the town of Goulburn, Australia in 2012. In the words of one resident, “Someone call a scientist!” (For more information see the article, “Why Spooky Spiders Rained from the Sky in Australia,” published May 19, 2015)

the world functions. It disrupts the very manner in which we think, and creates new possibilities, new pathways of thought.

The shock of the uncanny actually creates more consciousness, a richer sense of self – it could even be said to make us more human. What is perhaps most surprising is that the events which generate such higher consciousness are actually those which are biologically problematic for our bodies:

It is important to note that in this model, prediction error (mediated by the sensory affect of surprise), which increases incentive salience (and therefore conscious “presence” of the self) in perception, is a “bad” thing, biologically speaking. The more veridical the brain’s generative model of the world, the less surprise (the less salience, the less consciousness, the more automaticity), the better. (Solms and Panksepp 166)

The kind of prediction errors that psychologist Solms and neurologist Panksepp are referring to may seem superficially simple. Consider a lab-rat in a labyrinth; he has found a specific reliable route to his cheese. One day, a wall seals off that particular route, and he must find a new path, literally, to obtain sustenance. And if the wall is made of some substance he has never before encountered – glass, for example, instead of wood – the rat will have to readjust his world picture to admit that he can not necessarily access something simply because he can see it. While errors such as these may be “bad” from a biological perspective (especially if we do not learn how to navigate our new circumstances), they are decidedly positive for our mental capabilities. They prompt learning, higher processes of thought, and self-awareness. The disturbing sensation of a prediction error is actually the reason we think about thinking at all.

Errors that begin as simple become increasingly complex as we evolve new and ever more complicated interpretations of the world. Certain natural phenomena, an earthquake for example, no longer feel as shocking to us as perhaps they once did, because we have developed an understanding of what causes them, and can even to a certain extent anticipate

their arrival. But an earthquake that somehow defied this understanding – one which perhaps was restricted to a small area, or which recurred in the same location in rapid succession over the course of years – would feel decidedly uncanny. A witness to such an event would feel both an element of fear, but also a compulsion to explore and explain. Curiosity is human nature, and our innate need to understand the world makes the uncanny both terrifying and also attractive. To approach the value of prediction error from another angle, it may be useful to think through the language of apprehension. Apprehension is a complex physical sensation; the term can encompass both a moment of sudden understanding or insight as well as anxiety and foreboding. The word also conveys the sense of “seizure” or “capture,” a fitting metaphor for the way in which the uncanny thrill can take possession of a body, exerting a seemingly autonomous control over muscles, breath, pulse rate. The term uncanny refers to both the source of our anxiety and the feeling it generates. Prediction error helps elucidate the former, apprehension the latter. The experience itself is a complex interaction, a negotiation, an engagement between one and the other.

My encounter with the marble was quite clearly a prediction error – a moment when the world defied my logic for it, even seemed to defy the logics of physics and gravity. In that moment, I was seized by the awareness of knowledge outside myself. I have felt similar disruptions since then, and I have confronted that same abyss in other, equally unexpected circumstances. A familiar limitless depth stared at me from the unblinking eyes of the mannequins of Tadeusz Kantor’s theatre. Kantor’s puppet-mannequins were infamous for their lifelike but also distant stare – two little black eyes, gazing out from a form that uncomfortably resembles child, doll and corpse. In human or human-like figures, the eye should conform to certain expectations – we anticipate movement, the reflection of light off the back of the retina, the contraction of the iris, signs of consciousness, or alternatively, the

unquestioning stillness of a glass or plastic eye. Replacing the space of the eyes with pure blackness inserts an infinite void into the space of a doll's head. Kantor's dolls convey just enough humanity to establish expectations that their eyes then work directly to contradict.<sup>3</sup> You look into the abyss, and the abyss looks back at you. They are frightening, but also exert a kind of irresistible magnetic pull. Their gaze lays claim to an understanding that hovers just outside our reach.

The uncanny crosses borders; it translates and confuses simple categorical distinctions. It can be found in real life (as it was in my parents' backyard), on the page, on the screen or on the stage. But the kind of prediction errors that take place in film or literature are a step removed from the uncanny of real life. The expectations we have of the literary world are broad and necessarily fluid, as flexible as our imaginations. In order to achieve the uncanny, books and films must first construct expectations somewhat in keeping with our natural view of the world specifically in order to contradict them. Theatre, however, is different. It is constructed not of words or images or pixels, but out of the same fundamental materials as real life – real space, real time, real bodies and objects. Therefore theatre inherently presents the same expectations for the behavior of those materials. We begin with similar predictions, and so the uncanny of theatre has nearly as much potential to shift our view of reality as the uncanny of real life itself. In fact, the uncanny on stage is sometimes indistinguishable from the uncanny of reality – Kantor's dolls would be as discomfiting if encountered in your living

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<sup>3</sup> The conflicting impressions conjured by Kantor's dolls suggest that they fall into the realm of the "Uncanny Valley" as theorized by Masahiro Mori. Mori explored the fact that our response to robots grows initially more positive as they begin to look more human. But at a certain point, between their being mostly humanoid and being entirely lifelike, that appeal turns to revulsion, and we find robots to be a source of uncanny terror. Something about a form which is decidedly not human trying to appear human provokes nausea and anxiety. Mori suggested that these forms remind us of death.

room as they are within a performance (arguably more so).<sup>4</sup> Theatre allows us to encounter uncanny phenomena in a somewhat controlled environment. Perhaps the key distinction between the uncanny of real-life and the uncanny of the stage is that the latter is created by *design*. No one (as far as I will ever know) designed that drainpipe and that marble's eternal fall.<sup>5</sup> But every fiber of Kantor's mannequins was executed according to a very specific plan – one which we can therefore scrutinize.

And yet, surprisingly little writing on the subject of the uncanny deals with theatre. Recent scholarship on this phenomenon has increasingly focused on film; older studies tend to draw on literary examples. There has not, as yet, been a concentrated study of the experience on stage. This absence is perhaps particularly noteworthy, when considering that many theorists call attention to the inherent uncanniness of theatre itself. Marvin Carlson, in his "The Haunted Stage" argues that all theatre is a "haunted" realm; that all plays could be titled "Ghosts" (Carlson 1). Alice Rayner likewise declares the stage to be the ephemeral playground of spirits and specters. I wholeheartedly agree that there is something essentially and inherently uncanny to any theatrical performance. As Carlson argues, the act of theatrical representation is always also re-presentation. It constantly reaches back to what has gone before, so that the whole is pervaded by a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) sense of *déjà*

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<sup>4</sup> This is not *necessarily* true: not everything that provokes the sensation of the uncanny on stage would do so in real-life. But Kantor's dolls, by virtue of their design, material, and silent unblinking stare, are unsettling wherever one encounters them. In addition to the mannequins used in performance, Kantor created a corresponding doll-student at a desk for a museum installation in 1983, which is as disturbing as the puppets of the performance (see image in Pleśniarowicz 229). Some puppets and masks that seem disturbing on stage can be equally chilling while lurking backstage or in the wings; others lose their power when removed from a specific context, or without the aid of suggestive lighting or scenic background.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, some gardener or irrigation specialist had to have made the drainpipe (assuming it was real), and some marble-maker blew the glass of the marble, but that kind of creation has no relationship to the uncanny effect these two objects combined to create.

vu. Theatre always intermingles presence (bodies, actors, scenery) with absence – imagined characters, illusions, fantasy. The use of the real to create the unreal is indeed uncanny at a fundamental level. But the claim that *all* theatre is uncanny runs the risk of normalizing this effect to the extent that it becomes invisible and insensible. If every performance is uncanny, then it is unsurprising that we have lost our awareness of that fact. But there are performances and productions which take this implicitly uncanny nature and make it explicit – that force the audience to confront the spectral qualities of performance directly.

Uncanny theatre is characterized, first and foremost, by its negotiation of space. Performances that engage our sense of apprehension do so by virtue of their unique spatiality, articulated through a particular use of movement and scenography, bodies and objects. Since even before Freud, theories of the uncanny have progressed along primarily two trajectories – one which approaches the phenomenon as a mental construct, a puzzle to be analyzed, and the other, which prioritizes the visceral element, and addresses the uncanny as a bodily negotiation with the world. A theatrical uncanny engages both of these approaches, but ultimately requires that the former recognize its subservience to the latter.

### **Locating the Uncanny, A Brief History of Thought *Or from Cause to Effect to Affect***

My understanding of the uncanny draws upon the discoveries of contemporary cognitive science, but that does not mean that it dismisses the contributions of psychology – quite the opposite. The experience of the uncanny has long been the purview of that particular field of inquiry, with Freud's essay as the most obvious example. The idea of the uncanny as prediction error or act of apprehension is not so much a break from this past work as it is an expansion or progression of these earlier ideas, though how that is true may not immediately



be apparent. In both aesthetic theory and psychoanalytical studies, theorists have struggled with two simultaneous tasks – first, an interpretation of the disparate and disjointed sources of the uncanny response, and second, an analysis of the response itself. Attempts to handle the first task almost inevitably collapse into the second.

Defining the uncanny has always been perilous. Ernst Jentsch, Freud's predecessor in exploring the psychological phenomenon, declares at the beginning of his own essay that he will not even make the attempt. He suggests that it might be possible to articulate a limited working definition, but that "one can scarcely hope for a step forward in knowledge by this path" (8). He goes on to stress "it is better not to ask what it is, but rather to investigate how the affective excitement of the uncanny arises in psychological terms" (ibid). Through this study, he arrives at the conclusion that the sensation of the uncanny is caused by doubt and uncertainty – most specifically, uncertainty regarding whether something is or is not alive. He goes on to consider the processes by which this doubt is produced. He is not the only theorist of this material to convert questions of "what" into questions of "how."

Freud does offer a definition, indeed the most famous and consequential definition. I myself used it above when first labeling my childhood experience uncanny – the familiar intermingled with the strange. Though not the first to note that relationship (Jentsch uses similar language to describe the sensation), Freud arrives at this definition through an etymological exploration of the term in German (*unheimlich*), which continues to resonate and shape our theories of the uncanny today.<sup>6</sup> As Freud explains, the term 'unheimlich' is intertwined with its opposite, or 'heimlich' (Freud 134). Even in this, its simplest conception,

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<sup>6</sup> After presenting Freud's definition of 'unheimlich,' Nicholas Royle offers an etymological study of his own for the English 'uncanny'. Not surprisingly, his reenactment of Freud's technique arrives at a parallel discovery – that the archaic form of 'canny' already contains the supernatural connotations of 'uncanny.'

the uncanny is expressed in conditional terms: the heady interdependence of the familiar with the strange, the impossible with the necessary. The uncanny does not exist (and therefore cannot be expressed) in abstraction – it is always in relationship with its context.

Unconvinced by Jentsch's conclusions about "intellectual uncertainty," Freud sets out to explore the phenomenon in greater detail for himself. He too shifts from trying to define what the uncanny is to attempting to understand *how* it works. Recognizing the limitations of his definition (or perhaps its unclear designation), he offers up a catalogue of the experiences that fulfill the category. So disparate are its elements that the list itself challenges any singular definition. These elements are, in no particular hierarchical order, the automaton, the double, the removal of the eyes or other body parts, those body parts in independent movement, numerical recurrence, the 'omnipotence of thoughts,' the haunted house, supernatural powers, madness (148-151). And as he admits, the list is not exhaustive. The diversity of these sources of the uncanny suggests that what they share in common is not a quality inherent in them, but rather the effect that they produce in us. For Freud, that effect is a mental phenomenon – the result of repressed fears and desires returning to haunt us.

Nicholas Royle's book, titled simply *The Uncanny*, offers a contemporary and comprehensive exploration of this subject matter. He borrows more than just his title from Freud – he too takes Freud's definition as fundamental, and quickly shifts from definition to examples, offering his own extensive list, not dissimilar to Freud's (Royle 1-2). He seemingly delights in the various forms which the uncanny can take, which leads him to agree that the phenomenon tells us more about ourselves than it does about the forms of the uncanny:

The uncanny has to do with the sense of secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light. But it is not 'out there', in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and

borders, an experience of liminality. It may be that the uncanny is a feeling that happens only to oneself, within oneself, but it is never one's 'own': its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world 'itself'. It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body, the very estrangement of inner silence and solitude... (Royle 2)

Though he suggests that the meaning of the uncanny may adhere to "the world 'itself'", Royle places 'itself' in quotations marks for a reason. The uncanny is an aspect of the world as it disrupts our sense of self – the world not as it is, then, but as we perceive it. It is some error or rupture in that reception/perception that provokes the feeling of the uncanny, which he so aptly describes as the sense of being "foreign" to ourselves.

We recognize the uncanny not by something intrinsic to the object, but by the way that object is perceived and received. Each of Freud's and Royle's examples can be shown to upset the behavior of the world as we anticipate it. They are themselves prediction error, events that become upsetting in the context of our expectations and beliefs. I expect that only one person exactly like myself exists in the world – encountering another like myself challenges the fundamental conception of my individuality. We expect that wood, plastic and glass will not suddenly begin to move on their own – a clockwork doll, especially one of a specific degree of realism, challenges those expectations.<sup>7</sup> The sources of the uncanny, disparate as they may be, contradict our view of the world and generate a response of apprehension. Often the latter sensation precedes our awareness of what has caused this response, or how.

Royle stresses that the phenomenon of the uncanny refuses simple classification, and challenges the very idea of genre: "the uncanny calls for a different thinking of genre and text, and of the distinctions between the literary and non-literary, academic and non-academic writing" (18). The uncanny, he suggests, is inherently about a certain imperfect fit – it escapes

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 2 above, on Mori's "Uncanny Valley."

the kind of explanations and definitions to which a “genre” normally submits. As a demonstration of this intractability, Royle critiques Tzvetan Todorov’s attempt to neatly delineate the uncanny as a genre. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov explores the uncanny by virtue of it being a “neighboring genre” to his main area of interest, “the fantastic.” But his “fantastic” turns out to be just another name for “the uncanny,” which becomes clear when he tries to draw distinctions between the two.

Todorov defines the fantastic as a genre of “uncertainty” – the very quality Jentsch declared seminal to the uncanny. It is marked by ambiguity and doubt: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). He says it is bordered by “neighboring genres” of the uncanny and the marvelous. In the marvelous, according to Todorov, the supernatural is ultimately accepted as supernatural. In his uncanny, which he acknowledges is different from Freud’s (and clearly from Jentsch’s as well), the uncertainty resolves into a natural explanation, which removes the hesitation from another direction. The argument becomes particularly confused when he tries to explain what *his* uncanny therefore even is, if not simply the resolution or negation of the ambiguity that he finds in the fantastic. He explains that works of the uncanny,

provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar. The definition is, as we see, broad and vague, but so is the genre which it describes: the uncanny is not a clearly delimited genre, unlike the fantastic. More precisely it is limited on just one side, that of the fantastic; on the other, it dissolves into the general field of literature... (Todorov 46)

The fantastic overlaps with the uncanny, and the uncanny spills over into all of literature.

Royle argues that Todorov has forced himself into a rather “strange corner” which demonstrates “the folly of attempting to provide a structuralist ‘explanation’ of the topic” (18).

Todorov’s approach to the term uncanny is singular – the natural and logical explanation that

he considers a part of his literary uncanny would negate the emotional resonance so fundamental to other theorists of this subject matter. The uncanny of this dissertation follows the more established conception, which further has the benefit of encompassing the very material Todorov terms ‘fantastic.’

There are other methods than structure to categorize these works. Todorov acknowledges the existence of an alternative: to classify this material not by its structure, but by virtue of a specific response in the reader – an approach to which he is obviously disinclined. HP Lovecraft serves as a main example of this method, who writes, “we must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author’s intentions and the mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes...” (quoted in Todorov 34). As discussed above, this is essentially the same conclusion we can draw about the way we recognize the uncanny itself. Todorov objects that, “if we take [these] declarations literally – that the sentiment of fear must occur in the reader – we should have to conclude that a work’s genre depends on the *sang-froid* of its reader” (35). This objection depends on the belief that one person’s emotional landscape is entirely different from another’s, and that the triggers for our fears and emotions are entirely unique. While of course, the degree of response may vary from person to person, the conditions and methods for evoking fear function largely the same for essentially all human beings, or we would not be able to point to a shared uncanny in the first place. My approach to this genre is more akin to Lovecraft’s. We both begin where Todorov ends – with the uncanny effect. The feeling is the starting place, as it is also for Freud and Jentsch. First we recognize the works that provoke this emotional response and only then investigate how these feelings are generated.

Looking at works of the uncanny from this vantage point is particularly useful in exploring what constitutes a specifically “theatrical” uncanny, and distinguishes it from the

effect in literature or film. If the critical aspects of the uncanny were determined by plot, for example, there would be no value in examining the distinctions between different media. A story which is uncanny on paper would be uncanny in film and on stage. But that is not in fact the case.<sup>8</sup> For this very reason, uncanny theatre is a genre of performance and productions, not texts. A play that may be exceedingly uncanny when read can be rendered mundane in performance, and vice versa. Certain plays and scenarios will of course lend themselves to a kind of otherworldly atmosphere, but parameters of the actual performance will determine whether or not that effect in fact affects the audience. I have witnessed productions of *Macbeth* that generate more laughter than anxiety. The response of the audience is not simply a criteria of this genre, then – it is *the* criteria. Or to state it more bluntly, my purpose here is the exploration of the interaction between production design and spectator response – the designation of this genre is a means to that end.

To the extent that the uncanny, then, is a category of experience, the uncanny theatre as a genre is simply the category of performances that provoke this type of experience, a category that is both fluid and flexible. Its simplicity is also its challenge – the category is necessarily broad. I cannot easily delineate my subject matter by a specific historical period, or a particular form, method, or region. But the expansive nature of the material does not diminish the value of the inquiry. In any study of the uncanny, often more can be learned from a single specific example explored in detail than by broad survey. In this dissertation, I dedicate each chapter to a single production or artist in order to allow for precisely such a detailed and extensive exploration. I choose to examine only productions from the past 35 years, not because the uncanny is necessarily unique to contemporary theatre, but rather

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<sup>8</sup> Freud's main example of the uncanny is the ETA Hoffmann tale, *The Sandman*. The operatic version, by Offenbach, is notorious for failing to achieve a similarly uncanny effect in performance.

because these productions allow for a most intimate access. They make possible either my first hand experience or a nearly direct encounter via video or archival recordings (or both). This personal contact enriches the appreciation of the uncanny as *performed*.

### **Approaching the Theatrical Uncanny**

To examine this particular phenomenon of reception, I make use of an investigative method that accesses such responses directly. Phenomenology is the study of the world not as it is, but as it is perceived. The uncanny is meaningless without our perception of it, and so the method is particularly apt. Phenomenology offers experience to our understanding through description or demonstration, rather than analysis. As Merleau-Ponty presents it in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, “It is the attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer” (xx). This descriptive practice does not replace or overtake analytical methods – it is rather an alternative method of reasoning about the world. If Kant’s *noumenon* is the world as it truly is and *phenomenon* is the world as we experience it, phenomenology is only interested in the latter. To the extent that the uncanny is a *phenomenon* that can exist even without a *noumenon*, perhaps phenomenology is not just suitable but rather necessary.

The application of phenomenology in theatre studies first emerged as a response to a semiotic approach, as an attempt to reverse the reduction of everything on stage to a “sign.” As Bert States conceived it, phenomenology for theatre discourse was a tool capable of exposing that “theater... is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that *are* what they seem to be” (States 20). The elements of theatre, he argued, “achieve their vitality... not simply by signifying the world but by being *of* it” (States 20). As a

response to a linguistic approach to theatre, States' phenomenology emphasizes things as they are, rather than as they seem to be. In his understanding, the phenomenologist pursues "the essence' of things" and therefore will "subsume their sign function under their phenomenal character as objects in the real world" (States 21). He demonstrates these priorities by examining a few key objects in theatre that resolutely hold to their own intrinsic reality, despite the potential representational needs of the performance. A clock, he argues, will always behave *clock-like*, and a dog performs its dogness. These things interest him for the way in which they are exactly what they seem to be, to the point of even disturbing the theatrical illusion.

Though he dwells on the practical reality of the objects and bodies on stage, he also exposes the emotional impact those objects and bodies have. He seeks to "abridge the process of signification and throw the emphasis onto the empathic response" (24). Phenomenology accepts, embraces even, that the attempt to articulate a direct understanding of what things are is futile – every perception will necessarily be colored by our own emotional, physical, and mnemonic background. Phenomenology does not care if the object of perception is real or imagined, illusion or dream, memory or present moment, except to the extent that these will have different qualia, distinct shades of perception.<sup>9</sup> My use of phenomenology is minimally interested in the objects and spaces of theatre as they truly are, if we could even identify what that would mean. Rather, I am interested in how we perceive them, and how our perception of them is entangled with emotion, and memory. These priorities manifest in the use of extensive description, even exaggeration, in order to access the experience of the uncanny as

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<sup>9</sup> "...ambiguity, illusions, and mirages... are fundamental aspects of the perceptual synergy out of which our so-called 'objective' constructions are built" (Hass 38).



directly as possible, always recognizing that the uncanny may not be present in some concrete sense – in fact the uncanny is often found in the invisible and insensible.

Since States introduced the method to theatre studies, the use of phenomenology has evolved to consider just these sorts of questions. Critics like Andrew Sofer and Alice Rayner both make use of phenomenology to explore an aspect of theatre practice which is more absent than present. Sofer's book *Dark Matter* is an exploration of the invisible, the hidden and the unseen in performance. In *Ghosts*, Rayner explores the spectral qualities of theatre through actual ghosts, absent ghosts, and the methods of ghosting that pervade all theatre practice. Rayner even suggests that phenomenology is ideally suited for the study of ghosts' complex materiality. She writes, "Like ghosts, both phenomenology and psychoanalysis fail tests of rationality and, often, credibility" (xiii). Therefore, she asserts, such methods are all the more capable of handling subject matter that presses beyond the limits of rationality – such as the phantasmagoric and also the uncanny. If phenomenology does not submit to the laws of logic, therein lies exactly its virtue. Perhaps this irrationality is precisely what allows it to approach the phenomena which scurry away from the logical mind, like insects at the flick of a switch.

Both Sofer and Rayner navigate the fundamental materiality of the stage, but that does not preclude the exploration of the insensible, which is equally a part of the perceptual process. Just because we neither see, hear, taste, touch nor smell something does not prevent us from perceiving it, though that may seem to be a paradox. Because the process of perception is relational, what we do access with our senses is always placed within a context,

against a background.<sup>10</sup> And the material of that relationship, that background, can be built of darkness and invisibility and silence, or what Sofer terms “dark matter”:

Translated into theatrical terms, dark matter refers to the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance. If theater necessarily traffics in corporeal stuff (bodies, fluids, gases, objects), it also incorporates the incorporeal: offstage spaces and actions, absent characters, the narrated past, hallucination, blindness, obscenity, godhead, and so on. No less than physical actors and objects, such invisible presences matter very much indeed, even if spectators, characters, and performers cannot put their hands on them. (Sofer 3)

We are capable of perceiving both absence and presence. Sofer terms the process by which we trace the effects of dark matter in performance “spectral reading” (5). He applies this process to a series of examples (‘case studies’) drawn from a wide range of periods and styles, in order to demonstrate a universal applicability. Though my own inquiry deals directly with questions of absence, invisibility, and the unseen, our projects diverge in their focus. He explores the importance and necessity of ‘dark matter’ for all theatre, even in (especially in) conditions that are not particularly frightening. My task is more specific and more modest. I am interested in the invisible for its power to provoke a specific uncanny fear, and so I am looking for instances that constitute a unique use of dark matter, rather than how dark matter can be found in all of theatre practice.<sup>11</sup>

Rayner also uses the supernatural to address questions about theatre in general, which leads her to handle the conventional alongside the strange and disturbing. Though she specifically denies the attempt to describe some “ontological essence” of theatre, she seeks

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<sup>10</sup> Phenomenology stresses that perception is always “*relational* and *meaning-laden*” (Hass 29). Rather than giving us direct access to things, “Perceptual experience is always complex, a *figure* against a *background*, a thing amid a context” (Hass 29).

<sup>11</sup> Sofer connects the invisible to the distinction between terror and horror: “Horror is what we see, terror is what we know is there though it remains unseen” (5). A useful distinction for separating the uncanny from the frightening in general. But again, not everything that is invisible provokes terror – the uncanny is the specific negotiation of the terrifying invisible.

something constant in theatre practice as a whole. She qualifies – “I hope to suggest that the ghost is not so much an essence of theatre as it is an inhabitant of all its elements” (Rayner xv). She sees ghosts not only in moments of haunting or horror, but also in theatre at its most mundane.<sup>12</sup> Despite their attraction to the invisible and the spectral, Rayner and Sofer ultimately work to expose these elements in places which are not necessarily frightening or unsettling in themselves. But both provide particularly useful tools for the exploration of the uncanny on stage, and examples of how phenomenology can be applied as a method. Their work in many ways is an overture and an invitation to an exploration of the explicitly uncanny performance.

Phenomenology does have its limitations, and criticisms. First, one could argue that it is necessarily too subjective. Of course, that subjectivity is precisely its value – but it does suggest the need for a corresponding method to balance it. Rayner turns to psychology (not perhaps the most objective alternative). I draw upon cognitive science, which first introduced the concept of “prediction error” and its utility to this study. All three of these methods, however, could be accused of being too cerebral, of placing the uncanny entirely within the realm of the mind. The very term “prediction error” seems to imply that the uncanny is a mental process. But this implication stems from a long-standing misconception of both predictions and our minds. It is not in some disembodied bubble that we make our plans and

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<sup>12</sup> Rayner actually makes a seemingly similar critique of Marvin Carlson’s approach in *The Haunted Stage*, suggesting that his understanding of “haunting” inhabits too fully the realm of the familiar. She argues, “Making full use of the terms *ghost* and *haunting* involves, it seems to me, their remaining in the realm of uncertainty” (Rayner xxiii). Rayner’s own emphasis is on exposing the uncanny contained within tradition: “Each chapter... addresses some mundane aspects of contemporary theatre convention and traces how conjunctions between the living and the dead can be read through ordinary and overlooked elements” (Rayner xiii), but she does strive to sustain the power of ambiguity within those “ordinary elements.” The elements themselves are not necessarily particularly disturbing; rather, the main value of her exploration is the discovery of uncomfortable and anxious truths within the seemingly ordinary.

assessments of the world – our bodies make predictions, every bit as much as our conscious brain. In fact, the more fundamental the prediction, the more engrained it is in our bodily awareness.

The idea that brain and body can be considered distinct from each other is a holdover from a Cartesian view of the world. That kind of duality, which suggests that our “minds” are somehow independent of our physical selves, has largely been rejected. But its potent hold on our imagination lingers in the tendency of cognitive science to act as though the brain functions in isolation, a tendency which researchers have recently begun to correct.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenology, for all its subjectivity and inward seeming focus, works against that preconception by stressing that the body is the source and the foundation for all perception. The body is the necessary access or ‘opening’ towards the world. Merleau-Ponty presents the primacy of the body in these terms: “With regard to spatiality... one’s own body is the always implied third term of the figure-background structure, and each figure appears perspectively against the double horizon of external space and bodily space” (Merleau-Ponty 103). The body is the first background against which all sense and perception is given. The body can also disappear from perception. Merleau-Ponty offers a usefully theatrical analogy for the body’s ability to evade conscious perception – “Bodily space... is the darkness of the theater required for the clarity of the performance” (Merleau-Ponty 103). When phrased like this, the body itself becomes a kind of “dark matter” – an invisible presence which exerts its gravitational force upon what is visible and sensible. The body can be subsumed in

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<sup>13</sup> Ingram notes that dualism, like complete skepticism or even psychology, is essentially impossible to disprove. Even so, very few neuroscientists claim to even consider it a possibility. Even if it were possible however, the idea can have little effect on the progress of neuroscience, precisely because of the division it presupposes between brain and mind. Either the mind is brain, and neurology can explore it, or the mind is not brain, and neurology will never access it (Ingram 10). See also Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, and Raymond W Gibbs, Jr., *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*.

perception, but it can also be actively perceived. It is easy to forget our bodies when we are focused on something external – a sunset, or a knock at the door – but if we become hungry or thirsty or ill, our bodies can quickly become our primary focus again. The uncanny, like pain or grief or any strongly physicalized emotion, thrusts our bodies back into our awareness.

One of the fundamental hypotheses of this dissertation is the assertion that the uncanny is an embodied experience, a feeling mediated through and recognized by its carnal workings. It results from certain unsettling interactions between our bodies and the matter and space around us. In highlighting the inherent corporeality of the uncanny, I am aware that I am shifting away from the historical precedent. Due largely to its association with Freud, the uncanny is often presented as existing within the mind, at the unstable border between the conscious and unconscious. Shifting our perspective from the mind to the body may therefore seem to be a break, but again this rupture is not as severe as it initially may seem.

### **The Affective Unconscious: The Embodied Mind**

In his essay, Freud moves from the declaration that the uncanny is the familiar made strange to his perhaps more well known theory that the uncanny constitutes the return of the repressed – the resurgence of unacceptable fears and desires which have been pushed below our conscious awareness. This definition, while metaphorically useful, has had the unfortunate side effect of suggesting that the uncanny belongs to the realm of pathology and dysfunction. Many contemporary cognitive scientists have been tempted to dismiss Freud and his psychoanalysis entirely. As James Uleman declares in his introduction to *The New Unconscious*, “the psychoanalytic unconscious is widely acknowledged to be a failure as a scientific theory because evidence of its major components cannot be observed, measured precisely, or

manipulated easily. The theory's complexity renders it largely unfalsifiable" (5). While it can't be disproven, that very fact justifies its dismissal as science.<sup>14</sup> But a flat out rejection of Freud runs the risk of dismissing many of his insights, and of possibly even dismissing the value of the uncanny itself. Freud's theory of the uncanny has lingered, itself making uncanny recurrences in philosophy and aesthetics, despite a turn away from many of his other theories. This resilience indicates that there is much still to be gained from his analysis. An investigation of where contemporary science and Freudian theory intersect reveals some of his insights are still viable. The key link, fittingly enough, is to be found again in the body.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement has been developing to bridge the gap between neuroscience and psychology – producing the new interdisciplinary field of cognitive psychology. Members of this field have done much to demonstrate the ways in which Freud's work can still be of value in understanding the "new" consciousness, and have attempted to "adapt" Freud's unconscious in order to make it "more empirically tractable" (Uleman 5). A 2012 paper in *Brain Sciences* entitled "The 'Id' Knows More than the 'Ego' Admits" suggests one way of negotiating that possibility. Authors Mark Solms and Jaak Panksepp argue that Freud's theory of mind may be more relevant than most cognitive scientists recognize. Solms and Panksepp argue that the cognitive unconscious is actually itself conscious, and has knowledge, even if we are not aware of it. They further claim that "the notion that the brain knows more than it consciously admits can be traced back historically to the clinical and conceptual work of Sigmund Freud" (Solms and Panksepp 150). This idea was the foundation

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<sup>14</sup> Rayner also describes the acknowledged "failure of psychoanalysis as a scientific discourse" despite her inclination to work intimately with its methods. She makes the observant point that "Within psychoanalysis, denial itself is a signal for the blind spot within consciousness" (xiv). Psychoanalysis may negate itself as scientific discourse, but simultaneously it also justifies its own purpose – to explore what we would rather ignore, particularly if one of the subjects we would rather ignore is itself psychoanalysis.

of his psychoanalysis, and his conviction that the conscious mind may, through therapy, be able to bring the knowledge held in the unconscious to the surface. Freud recognized multiple layers within unconsciousness, some of which were accessible to the conscious mind, and some of which were not.<sup>15</sup> Cognitive science also breaks down our minds into conscious and unconscious processes. Solms and Panksepp, like Freud, present a hierarchy of different types of consciousness, rather than an abrupt distinction between the conscious and the unconscious. The cognitive unconscious that most closely correlates to Freud's dynamic unconscious is what Solms and Panksepp term *affective consciousness*.

The "affective consciousness" provides "*anoetic* reactions" to external events (Solms and Panksepp 156). This consciousness is not the object of perception, rather it is the "subject of perception" (156) – it is a kind of "phenomenal consciousness." Both the *noetic* and *anoetic* forms of awareness originate in the body. The former (our standard understanding of consciousness) treats the body as external, and approaches it using the same tools with which it understands outside objects. The latter (the realm of affective consciousness) understands the body internally, through the bodily states we experience as emotions. *Affective consciousness* then, can be considered a technical term for Merleau-Ponty's "background body" – that dark theatre of all sensation. To offer an overly simple but useful translation of Freud's uncanny into cognitive terms – the uncanny is the resurgence of bodily consciousness to explicit conscious awareness.

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<sup>15</sup> Freud recognized that the unconscious could be further subdivided and distinguished. He separated the unconscious processes that can be brought to conscious attention from those which could not, which he called the preconscious. He then further subdivided the unconscious processes into those which were not conscious because of "automatization", and those which "were excluded from awareness by motivated resistances... He termed these processes "descriptively" and "dynamically" unconscious, respectively" (Solms and Panksepp 151). The dynamic unconscious is the realm of the repressed.

These two types of consciousness map well on to Freud's 'Ego' (external) and 'Id' (internal). Solms and Panksepp demonstrate that Freud himself thought of these mental systems in these terms (158). However, his 'id' was entirely driven by the pleasure principle, whereas the affective consciousness is a necessary component of our rational decision-making processes.<sup>16</sup> Solms and Panksepp go even further to argue that the affective consciousness is the necessary background by which we can have higher consciousness at all. It creates the affective states which allow us to "feel like this about that" (165), and to encode and record our experiences of the world. It allows us to have expectations about the external world. Affective consciousness is more than just the background for noetic consciousness. It is in fact the cause of these higher forms of consciousness, via prediction errors. When the expectations and desires of affective consciousness meet with an error, a higher mental process must be generated to regulate and control and avoid future errors.

Reconceiving the uncanny through the cognitive unconscious liberates the phenomenon from the Freudian association with repression and pathology. Rather than being the result of repressed and shameful urges, a cognitive uncanny is theoretically a productive, potent, even necessary aspect of human consciousness. What is potentially lost in this conceptual shift is the aspect of danger, that singularly icy chill unique to the uncanny. The Freudian view offered a plausible explanation for that sinister sensation – repression depicts the uncanny as the undesired and uninvited return of something we would prefer to keep hidden or forgotten. By contrast, a "prediction error" may seem to be too dispassionate a term for this material; the clinical language runs the risk of neutralizing the malevolent impression. However, we should not forget that the errors that cause the uncanny sensation potentially threaten our biological well-being, and therefore, are legitimately dangerous. The uncanny

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<sup>16</sup> For more on how the affective mind "reasons," see Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error*.



moment of apprehension relates directly to the sickening sensation that can occur when stumbling across a camouflaged animal, or a predator at rest. What I took to be a garden hose turns out in fact to be a snake. The realization provokes a chill, twice over. I apprehend in a moment an actual physical source of danger – the body prepares to fight or flee. But I also become aware that what I took for a harmless item was in fact something other than it appeared to be, suggesting the presence of a sinister intent. My mistake combines directly with the impression of intentional threat. The first few times a human encountered an error of this sort, the realization likely came too late, with the corresponding negative consequence. But as this error becomes more common, it becomes encoded into our biophysical memory as an instinct, one that makes someone wary of garden hoses. The visceral response is a record of errors we have good reason to avoid in the future. Though useful on an evolutionary scale, these errors suggest something potentially quite personally and intimately dangerous – an object or being in the world which constitutes a direct threat.

### **Sentient Space – the Secret Life of Objects**

The uncanny is an interaction between our selves and the outside world. That interaction takes place *in, upon, and through* our bodies, but it derives its significance from a (possibly imaginary) source located somewhere outside that body, entirely separate and independent of it. The uncanny may be an experience, a perception, but it is one that is grounded in the premise that the outside world is behaving oddly. It forces us to acknowledge not only our own consciousness, our internal knowledge, but also an external knowledge that we can only theorize, without ever truly accessing. The uncanny occurs in those moments when the outside world declares its own logic and its own rules. It suggests that the external world is somehow sentient – with its own consciousness and will.

Both phenomenology and cognitive science stop short of fully encompassing the uncanny, because ultimately they remain somewhat trapped within the spheres of our bodies and our minds (which are themselves inextricably interconnected). In *The Stage Life of Props*, Sofer's examination of theatre's humblest elements, he notes that phenomenology is limited in handling the materiality of the stage because it converts everything into a "sensory image" (Sofer vii). He answers this perspective by directing his attention to "the temporal and spatial dimensions of the material prop in performance" – he focuses on the object itself, and how it operates (Sofer vii). In order to confront the true face of the uncanny in performance, we must likewise give direct attention and authority to uncanny objects.

The complexity of uncanny experience requires the multi-faceted approach I have here developed. Freud's theories are useful from a metaphorical, even poetic perspective, and also because his ideas are themselves seductively, suggestively uncanny. And when translated into cognitive terms, they help articulate a new understanding, enriched by an awareness of an embodied mind. Phenomenology further enhances the role of bodily consciousness, while also engaging directly with the affective experience. These methods, however, even when employed in collaboration, only take us halfway there, or perhaps a bit further. These tools cannot completely access the phenomenon of the uncanny, because they cannot explore the most important consciousness of all – that of the uncanny beings themselves. Neither phenomenology nor cognitive science can navigate the inner world of the objects themselves, but in order to fully approach the uncanny, this is precisely what is required. An additional method is needed, one which asserts an independent consciousness beyond and external to our bodies, the very sentience of space and matter itself. Granted, we tread here into the realm of imagination, but that is also precisely what feeds the uncanny. And in exploring this

potentially uncertain territory, I lean not on scientists or philosophers, but instead, appropriately, on a novelist.

Perhaps no one has theorized this secret inner life of objects quite so potently as Polish author Bruno Schulz. His work (which itself represents several masterpieces of the uncanny) is influential, even seminal to the performers and artists I study here, most specifically Kantor and the Quay Brothers. In Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, he invents his own theology – a kind of devotion to matter itself. He dedicates several chapters to explaining this doctrine, referred to as the “Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies.” In a shadowy room, the protagonist’s father preaches this theology to his son, alongside a few half-believing servants. He explains, “There is no dead matter... lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life” (31). Matter itself has volition, intention, desire. It resists the shapes and figures into which man has attempted to shape it.

This understanding of objects, or “matter,” is really a reconception of space. A Schulzian space is infused throughout with sentience. That which we refer to as matter is simply space formed into specific articulations. Rather than space, we might better call it spatiality, or space as perceived/experienced. Schulz’ work reveals how “spatiality” is essential to the uncanny not just on stage, but also in literature and imagery. The uncanny marks a disconnect between our expectations of the behavior of matter and its own inherent possibility. Such spatial conflicts are present in the uncanny in its various forms – literature, film, art, theatre, and of course, our dreams. But in most media, the unique spatial parameters of the uncanny are conveyed via our imagination. Theatre is the ideal medium to reveal these distortions, dealing as it does in the actual presence of both space and matter. Theatrical space is both imaginary and practical.

In performance, Schulzian sentient space takes several inter-related forms:

The Automaton, Puppet or Living Doll – pure matter brought to life  
Unstable Borders – shifting walls, transgressed gateways, chalk doorways, the edge of  
the abyss  
The Looking Glass, or Broken Mirror – site of doubling and imperfect reflection,  
always more permeable than it appears  
The Cave/Grotto – darkness pulsating with life  
The Object – ready-made, poor, or found, matter imbued with its own inscrutable  
knowledge, charged with emotion and memory  
The Underground Passage – basements, tunnels, sewers, drainpipes, points of access  
to another reality  
The Haunted House – poltergeists and paranoia  
The Miniature and the Giant – distortions of the basic relationships of size

Each of the productions I consider makes use of several of these forms, in different ways. The works examined in this study span a wide range with regards to style and form. From off-Broadway musical to immersive spectacle, from the avant-garde to commercial superpower, they are valuably distinct from each other. What they share, most importantly, is the uncomfortable feeling they evoke through their negotiation of matter – the bodies and objects of the performance, as well as the spatial parameters of their interaction.

The consciousness of the body and the consciousness of the object are the twin tracks of this investigation of the uncanny in performance. This study is kind of vivisection of these performances. I must recognize and support the independent life of the inanimate in performance, even as I seek to penetrate the knowledge of this realm. I oscillate throughout between argument and description, experience and imagination, to attempt to sustain the uncanny tension as long as possible. While at times this process may seem slow and indirect, it is necessary to allow for the slow crystallization of insight. To provide context for the chapters which follow (and also perhaps to earn a certain patience from the reader), I can offer here a succinct review of my overarching conclusions and themes. They are more descriptive than predictive – these are likely but not necessary conditions of the experience.

*The uncanny on-stage is immersive.* The uncanny frequently requires a reconception of the theatrical space. Shows in which the spectator's body is either literally or figuratively absorbed into the action thus have great potential to provoke this anxiety. Creating an uncanny effect across the comfortable aesthetic distance of a proscenium is challenging (though not impossible). The uncanny is easier to generate in performances which can approach their viewer from the front, the back, the sides, or that at the very least, cause the audience to question their comfortable distance from the performance.

*The uncanny on-stage is alive, especially when it is dead.* Death itself can play a role, can act through darkness, invisibility, negation. In the theatrical uncanny, the line between animate and inanimate becomes intentionally blurred. Objects are handled as though they possess the same degree of sentience, character, and emotional intelligence as the actors – sometimes more so. Bodies, buttons, blood, breath and breadth intermingle – coexist. All are capable of acting (in both senses of the words) on the uncanny stage. Keeping in mind that the uncanny loves paradox and reflection, the opposite claim must also be made – *the uncanny on-stage is dead, especially when it is alive.*

*The uncanny in performance mixes media.* The uncanny disdains distinctions of genre and form. It follows logically that it would also break down the barriers between different media. Many of the productions that create an uncanny effect intermingle film, video and projection with live action, and vice-versa. The expectations which adhere to one medium – the permanence of film, the spontaneity of theatre – are pitted against each other to create anxiety in the viewer.

*The uncanny stage rejects temporal linearity.* Time becomes yet another aspect of space, one which can move backwards as well as forwards, or wind in circles. Performances can occupy two or more kinds of temporality simultaneously. In particular, memory is a critical tool and

source for the distortion of time – uncanny performance moves in and out of memory, while also using it as a tool for generating and negating predictions.

These interrelated observations develop and evolve in greater detail in the chapters which follow. Each chapter performs an extended engagement with a single production or artist. My first chapter, on *Shockheaded Peter*, most directly addresses the power of the inanimate. It confronts the form of the puppet on a stage as unstable as our very “theatre of mind.” This late 20<sup>th</sup> century musical (or “junk opera” as creators McDermott and Crouch preferred to term it) adapts a 19<sup>th</sup> century picture book of tales for children – nursery rhymes of dark humor and moral instruction – into a self-aware theatrical romp. The production combines puppetry, pantomime, and an old music hall atmosphere, and revels in its surface simplicity – smiling at its own theatrical effects, and pointing out the strings that pull the puppets. The Freudian connotations of the stories are explicit – the castration anxiety is easily found in the tale of Conrad, whose thumbs are snipped off with scissors. But in its play, the production shifts its focus from childhood as the onset of repressed urges towards childhood as a period of corporeal and neurological development. The unstable body of the child is the origin and repository of the production’s anxiety. Fingernails extend like laser beams, hair radiates like a halo, thumbs and heads pop off. Children are burned, painted, bitten and decapitated. I demonstrate how the child-body (sometimes performed by a puppet, sometimes by an adult actor) is presented as unsettlingly fluid and permeable, and furthermore, how that fluidity is coherent with a cognitive developmental unconscious. Ultimately the performance climaxes in an act of absorption. The uncanny body of the child overtakes both production and audience, and subsumes the theatre itself.

For the Quay Brothers, the subject of my second chapter, the uncanny nature of theatrical space constitutes a beginning rather than an end. Though the artists work in

multiple media, theatre is their foundation, even in their films, which remain tied to the physicality of the actual object and occupied space. In creating their stop-action and puppet films, they navigate many of the same concerns as the stage. But these films allow them to pursue certain spatial manipulations further – in particular the realm of the *miniature*. Their miniverse seems intoxicatingly plausible, just underneath the world we perceive – an otherworld where forgotten dolls act out their drama amidst lost pins and animate screws. Their miniatures are *not* just minute versions of reality (in which the small simply mimics the large) but rather dangerous juxtapositions of the non-human and the human. I draw upon phenomenological explorations of the miniature and enclosure by Stewart and Bachelard to understand the Quay brother's artistry. I explore how their miniatures are subjected to very specific spatial relationships – positioned below, within, and behind – and how those relationships become intimately linked with theatrical space itself, even (and especially) in their films. I argue that the uncanny effect of their films is created by virtue of an insertion, a kind of nesting, of theatrical space within cinematic space.

My third chapter explores an alternative relationship between film and theatre. Punchdrunk's production of *Sleep No More* manages to encapsulate cinematic space within its live spatiality. Part dance theater, part installation art, part haunted house, the work transcends a simple category. The performance space brings to life Bachelard's "oneiric house" – the home of many rooms crafted by memory and traveled by daydreams. As the spectator navigates the labyrinthine interior of the McKittrick Hotel, closets open onto hallways, staircases carry you into dimly lit cobblestone streets, and mirrors reflect what is absent, rather than what is there. The space is encoded with familiarity – even the manner of surprise (a secret world inside a wardrobe...) offers a vaguely recognizable chill. Also strangely familiar is your location in time – the 1930's as crystallized and mythologized in film.

The experience is made stranger still by its singular social contract. Each spectator wears a mask, while each actor is (comparatively) exposed – increasingly so, in fact, as the evening progresses. The viewer occupies a position of voyeuristic anonymity. The mask converts spectators into specters who haunt a cinematic landscape that they can see, touch, smell and even taste. At *Sleep No More*, the uncanny results from the fact that the spectators themselves undergo a kind of living death.

My final chapter takes on the uncanniness of death itself, as manifested in Tadeusz Kantor's theatre. This chapter returns to the initial questions as it works towards conclusion. Though chronologically the earliest artist in my investigation, Kantor and his work provide the chance to effectively tie together the ideas of all three preceding chapters. Kantor's Theatre of Death – in particular, his production of *The Dead Class* – provides a singularly sustained intermingling of the inanimate with the animate. He anticipates the manipulations of space and memory articulated in *Sleep No More*; shares a metaphysical landscape and commitment to sentient space with the Quay Brothers; and approaches the uncanny childhood realm of *Shockheaded Peter*, just from a significantly different perspective. In *The Dead Class*, he investigates the memory rather than the reality of childhood. I reveal that Kantor's Theatre of Death is equally a theatre of *memory*. Kantor moves beyond Freudian repression to uncover the uncanny foundation of any act of recollection.

Any attempt to analyze the uncanny runs the risk of negating its essential ephemerality. Though I scrutinize these productions from various angles, I always return to the performances themselves as an equal and viable source of insight. If effective, I aim here to perform the uncanny almost as much as I investigate it. I attempt to provide access to the experienced reality of these productions through description, and also by using the techniques of the production itself in the design of each chapter. When working with the carnivalesque



funhouse of *Shockheaded Peter*, I echo its recursive nesting in the evolution of the argument, which slips deeper and deeper as it nears the center. In handling the Quay Brothers' approach to the miniature world below us, I guide the reader through multiple descents, each leading us closer to the final discovery. My third chapter wanders alongside the reader through the labyrinth of *Sleep No More*, as though revisiting a dream. And my final chapter moves in and out of memory like a room that can be entered, just as Kantor envisioned the room of his remembered childhood. The architecture of the dissertation as a whole manifests its own uncanny reflections and doublings, as well as a somewhat circular structure. The second and third chapters reflect each other in claims and subject matter. The first and fourth constitute an opposition (infancy against old age, childhood experienced versus childhood remembered) which is also a return. Though all the productions can be considered contemporary, it seems fitting to the uncanny's distortion of time that we arrive ultimately not in the future, but rather at a return to the recent past.

This dissertation is also a journey, from infancy through death, tracing the ways in which the uncanny is present but also evolving throughout the various phases of life. At the completion of this journey, I offer a short coda on a production of my own direction – an operatic adaption of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, which took place in a crypt. It seems appropriate that after death, I spend some time on the subject of burial, entombment, and the return of the dead, and how performance interacts with these conditions. This meditation on the crypt, though positioned at the conclusion of the dissertation, is both an end, and by the laws of the uncanny, another beginning. It is both a personal reflection on how this dissertation has inspired my own creative practice, and an invitation to other theatrical artists to pursue and generate more acts of uncanny performance.

## ***CHAPTER ONE: Child's Play – The Uncanny Children of Shockheaded Peter***

*This thing of darkness I do acknowledge mine.*

“The mind is full of monsters.” So announces actor Julian Bleach, the master of ceremonies, at the start of an evening of gothic decadence otherwise known as *Shockheaded Peter*.<sup>17</sup> He swaggers onto the forestage in bleary whiteface and tailcoat to greet the audience, or more accurately, warn them. Behind the curtain, he tells us, are the “portals to the darkest recesses of the human imagination.” What are these monsters that we shall see? An “infant pyromaniac!” he declares. A child who starves himself to death, another who bleeds out after the precipitous loss of his thumbs. The performance consists of a series of vignettes depicting children who, through their misbehavior, bring about their own demise. *Shockheaded Peter* is not a show *for* children. It is not even, really, a show *about* children. Instead, Mr. Bleach presents it as a feast, a smorgasbord where the flesh of monstrous children will be offered up to “your thirsty ears, your ravenous eyes” – casting the audience as a mob of salivating adults ready to feed their carnal, visceral desire.

*Shockheaded Peter* is itself the monstrous creation of many theatrical parents. The ‘junk opera,’ as they termed it, is the result of a collaboration between director Phelim McDermott, director-designer Julian Crouch, designer Graeme Gilmour, the musical trio *The Tiger Lillies*, and several performers, Mr. Bleach among them.<sup>18</sup> The team adapted a 19<sup>th</sup> century picture book, *Der Struwwelpeter*, by German author Heinrich Hoffmann. The book presents “merry

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<sup>17</sup> References to the production are drawn primarily from the video recording made on May 26, 2005, available at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>18</sup> Created by Julian Bleach, Anthony Cairns, Julian Crouch, Graeme Gilmour, Tamzin Griffin, Jo Pocock, Phelim McDermott, Michael Morris and the Tiger Lillies, Martyn Jacques, Adrian Hume and Adrian Stout. The original inspiration to adapt the book came from Michael Morris, who then brought in the Tiger Lillies. McDermott and Crouch (and their Improbable Theatre team) joined shortly thereafter. For more information on the production’s evolution see Crouch’s interview with Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

stories and funny pictures for children between three and six years” – a series of nursery rhymes whose dark humor has a clear pedagogical purpose.<sup>19</sup> Each tale contains moral instruction for the young child: not to play with matches, not to suck his thumbs, not to be a finicky eater. The “naughty, romping girls and boys” who do such things are each punished, with exaggerated consequences. Play with matches, burn to ashes. Suck on your thumbs, and a bogeyman figure with giant tailor’s scissors appears to slice them from your hands.

The production makes several adjustments to the book’s material. The nursery rhymes are presented in song form, to music composed by Martyn Jacques (the lead singer of the *Tiger Lillies* trio). In Hoffmann’s original telling, the naughty children are all punished in due course, but not all their crimes are fatal. In the stage version, each and every child dies (all but one – the significant exception). In the book, Cruel Frederick, who picks on creatures weaker than himself, is bitten by the dog he whips and has to take nasty medicine and go to bed. In the stage production, he is not only bitten but dies from the bite, convulsing hideously, frothing at the mouth, and collapsing before he is able to get off-stage.<sup>20</sup> The production revels in declaring the demise of each and every child. Almost every song ends with the refrain, “He was DEAD” often sung several times in a row.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the story of Johnny Head-in-Air, having taken us through the exercise multiple times, Jacques actually directs the

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<sup>19</sup> From Walter Strauss’ afterword to the 2002 Tri-lingual edition. These rhymes also have had a second life as linguistic teaching tools, not for children but for Latin scholars.

<sup>20</sup> If these stories sound like something Edward Gorey might have written, that’s for a good reason. His book, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, combining the purpose of “moral instruction” with children’s destruction, is a descendant of Hoffmann’s work. Martyn Jacques, whose interest in these stories provided much of the genesis for the production, was also drawn to Gorey’s work. He produced a Grammy-nominated album in 2003 of songs setting for several of Gorey’s unpublished stories. Even if not directly inspired by Hoffmann, Gorey was clearly cut from the same cloth, and it’s one that Martyn Jacques loves to wear.

<sup>21</sup> From Ben Brantley’s review in the *New York Times*: “Mr. Jacques delivers [the lyrics] with a relish that turns demonic whenever the word dead crops up. (He keeps repeating it, like a record stuck in a groove).”

audience to shout out the obvious conclusion for him. Leadingly he calls out, “He was....” and then pauses until the audience delivers the appropriate response – “DEAD.” His dead pan response indicates that he is not entirely satisfied with the audience’s effort. He repeats the call again and then again, while the audience’s cry grows in volume and glee, like students at a pep rally. Jacques turns the show’s destruction of children into a participatory event.

In adapting the book to the stage, the team also adds a self-aware theatrical framework in the form of Mr. Bleach as narrator/master of ceremonies. When his first appearance is not met with the appropriate level of excitement from the audience, he informs them that “I am the greatest actor in the world,” and that he will start again (giving the audience the opportunity to appreciate his presence more the second time). He both directs and participates in the action, guiding the scene changes, and jumping in and out of the stories. Throughout the production, he insinuates that his elevated acting abilities far exceed the quality of the material that he is presenting. On two separate occasions, he breaks into Shakespeare (including one rather extraordinary delivery of the notorious Richard III monologue), as if he is unable to restrain his skills to the humility of the performance. (These seemingly impromptu deliveries happen to coincide rather neatly with offstage costume changes and shifts of scenery.) By the end of the show, after the final insult to his sensibility, he leaves the stage in a huff, only to return for one last declaration, “I am a classically trained actor, I’ll have you know!!!!” Bleach applies the same exaggerated bravado to the small roles he plays throughout the evening (Harriet’s cat, the Scissor Man, Agrippa) that he does to his own persona – a caricature of “classical acting” at its most melodramatic.

Just as Bleach calls attention to himself and to all the performers as actors, the production highlights its own theatricality. Bleach’s opening monologue makes clear reference to the stage as stage, noting in particular its red curtain, with its power to both conceal and

reveal. The set is itself a theatre, with its own proscenium, floorboards and aforementioned curtain. This metatheatricity has a further purpose – to convert the stage into a metaphor for our mind. As Bleach declares, “behind this very crimson curtain stand the portals to the darkest recesses of the human imagination!” He continues, “For what could be more monstrous than.....” and then with grand dramatic pause, he steps to one side of the stage and throws open the curtain. But the gesture deflates, as the curtain reveals.... the empty stage. After several seconds of titters from the audience, Bleach finally finishes his sentence, “...the infant pyromaniac!” The figure does not appear, and Bleach moves on. The spectator wonders for moment if there has been some “mistake” in the performance. Perhaps the little pyro was meant to be posed dramatically behind the curtain, waiting there for Bleach to climactically reveal her. But, while the production embraces improvisation and spontaneity, most of its mistakes are entirely intentional. Like Bleach’s initial false exit, or the wig and costume malfunctions that follow later on, the production’s ‘errors’ actually work to fulfill a specific purpose: to call attention to the performance *as* theatre. And the implication of this “mistake” is that the true monster is the very stage itself.

*Shockheaded Peter* portrays the theatre as psychic playing space, with the heavy vermillion curtain the only separation between the conscious audience and the unconscious realm that lurks behind. As such, it stages our unconscious, and in particular, our unconscious as conceived by none other than Sigmund Freud. In his prologue, Mr. Bleach declares that the stories of these unfortunate prepubescents are more than merely cautionary tales. More like the barker outside the freak show tent (which he will later in fact become), he presents them as atrocities of nature: things which are best kept concealed behind a thick red curtain, but which will be revealed to those of a brave constitution. He thus casts them as Freud’s very definition of the uncanny: “That which was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has

come into the open” (Freud 132). The stories themselves, written in the mid-nineteenth century by Hoffmann (himself also a psychiatrist) are heavy with the exact sort of repression that Freud would thrill to uncover.

The production passes these stories through a kind of distorting filter in the music of Martyn Jacques, whose calls the unique style of his band, “Brechtian punk cabaret.”<sup>22</sup> Jacques is both the lead vocalist and accordionist for *The Tiger Lillies*, which has only two other members, a bassist and a percussionist. To found the group, Jacques combined seemingly incongruous elements to create his own sound and a performance experience quite unlike any other. Though he trained as an opera singer, he found his niche when he started to sing his own songs in a high-pitched falsetto while accompanying himself on the accordion. His material is dark, perverse, inspired by a period in his twenties spent living above a brothel. He and his band mates perform in period dress (looking like sadistic vaudevillian clowns) and use the white face make-up that all the performers of *Shockheaded Peter* display. Over the years, they’ve experimented with increasingly frightful versions of that make-up, a complement to the twisted sensibility of their music. Though he combines many eclectic sources in his material, when asked about what has influenced him, Jacques always mentions one particular artistic inspiration – Brechts’ *Threepenny Opera* and “All of that Berlin scene...”<sup>23</sup> He intends for his music to disturb, and it often offends – “If I manage to shock, then I’m succeeding in my aim...”<sup>24</sup> The response he seeks is visceral, a sense of discomfort fully resonant with the uncanny. In the words of bass player, Adrian Stout (a member of the band for over ten years), “[Our music] tends to hit them in unusual ways sometimes. It’s quite

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<sup>22</sup> From Lewis Jones’s interview with the band in *The Independent*.

<sup>23</sup> See David Whetstone’s article, “Martyn Jacques reflects on 25 years of The Tiger Lillies.”

<sup>24</sup> From Lewis Jones’ interview with the band in *The Independent*.

emotional. It's designed to create tension and confusion. It's not an easy evening or easy music. We challenge and disorientate the audience, we don't expect them to be wholly happy. We have to maintain the tension. The whole thing is about ambiguity."<sup>25</sup> The tension they create, like that of the uncanny, is mind-altering.

The production thus sandwiches its material between the Victorian children of its inspiration and the Brechtian/Weimar cabaret of their presentation. It contrasts and combines Victorian sentimentality with Brechtian contempt. These periods neatly bookend the work of Freud himself, presenting both the Victorian morality and repression that he responded to and the post-Freudian era of decadence and exhibitionism. *Shockheaded Peter* is explicitly about the revelation of what is concealed. Its Brechtian energies feed upon its Victorian content, throwing it open for our enjoyment. On the surface, it might appear that the production does exactly what it claims to do – reveals our hidden demons, a kind of enactment of Freudian psychotherapy at work. But as Freud discovered when wrestling the uncanny into his psychodynamic framework, the material is not so easily contained.

The production's effect is both more complex and sinister. The uncanny material is interwoven through the production on multiple levels. Most overtly, it presents itself as a carnivalesque freak show, that most gratuitous form of entertainment. Perhaps for this reason, performance theorists have given the production little attention – it is difficult to find much written about the show besides its reviews. But it is also, as Ben Brantley notes, a “sneaky allegory of repression that only grown-ups can fully appreciate.” As an allegory, the show addresses an audience of intelligent rational adults who can interpret the meaning of these children in the context of our conscious and unconscious minds. But we are as much the conduits of our mind(s) as we are capable of conceiving of them. Such an allegory can never

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<sup>25</sup> From Lewis Jones' interview.

be simple. The production speaks to us not only through direct address, but also on a visceral level that requires deeper consideration. What Bleach says about the uncanny is not necessarily what his body shows, or how our mind-bodies respond. And this is precisely the advantage of experiencing these uncanny stories on stage. We engage with them on *both* a mental and a corporeal plane – at the intersection where the uncanny can be most disturbing, and also most effective.

In order to expose this multi-level engagement with the uncanny, we must accept the production's own invitation/command to peer behind the curtain. Whatever it may seem on the surface, the uncanny is always most valuable for what it conceals. To reach these insights, we follow the model of the production itself, moving ever deeper inwards. Through its recursive spatiality, articulated in its scenic design and puppet objects, *Shockheaded Peter* does more than just allegorize the uncanny – it *performs* it. It enacts the very embodiment of mind so essential to the uncanny phenomenon.

### **Setting the Stage: The Theatre of our Unconscious**

It bears repeating: the scenic design of *Shockheaded Peter* is itself a theatre, a stage upon the stage. Production designers Julian Crouch and Graeme Gilmour choose to suggest a particular type of theatre for this show within a show – a puppet theatre. The production's sordid little world was inspired by Victorian toy theaters and puppet stages. A simple painted proscenium frames the previously mentioned red curtain. That proscenium is perforated with several openings – four doors and five windows encircling the frame. Mr. Bleach makes his first dramatic entrance through the lower door on stage right. Behind the curtain, the scenery is equally flimsy. Ben Brantley calls it a “cramped, multi-doored diorama of a set.” And it does indeed evoke the dioramas many children make in elementary school. The multi-doored



framework remains for the entire production, and scenes are changed with a bare minimum of effort – painted cut-out furniture and trees are carried on and off, a hand drops snow from one of the upper windows. This simplicity is efficient, allowing the main area of the stage to serve as drawing room, concert hall, or outdoor space, as required. But it also suggests a world of fantasy and imagination – an environment ripe for play.

There are, in fact, actual puppets in the show, most often portraying the unfortunate child protagonists. But the live actors are every bit as much puppets in this production. The actors perform in melodramatic pantomime, with expansive gestures that seem pulled by invisible strings. They each have a kind of neutrality, a stock character function that allows them to play multiple roles. Tamzin Griffin, who begins the show as the Mother figure, also portrays the incendiary young Harriet. Mr. Bleach is not only the master of ceremonies, but also Harriet's cat, the fearsome Scissor Man who eagerly removes Conrad's thumbs, and the scientist Agrippa, who executes the bully boys. Anthony Cairns, the Daddy of the evening, also plays cruel Frederick. A quick and relatively superficial costume change is all that the production provides to transform these actors from one character to another. All the performers are made-up in stylized whiteface, in costumes reminiscent of rag dolls and wind-up toys. Their make-up, though, is smudged and has a tendency to wipe off on the scenery, and their clothes are all somewhat dingy. If these are toys, they are the forgotten toys, the ones that have been abandoned in the attic, until some unseen hand finally restores them to this strange intermediate life. Their unloved appearance supports the designation of this as a "junk" opera, in which the performers themselves are given the status of rubbish.

The puppet theatre has of course an inherent link to the world of childhood. It might seem the obvious theatrical corollary for a children's picture book, and so perfectly suited to a retelling of Hoffmann's text. Beyond this superficial connection, though, puppets have a long-

standing association with our unconscious. In 1810, dramatist Heinrich von Kleist wrote an essay exploring the mysterious nature of the puppet, *Über das Marionettentheater*. The essay presents a conversation between Kleist and a popular dancer at the opera, and arrives at the conclusion that the puppet's power derives from its access to the pure unconscious, from its freedom from the burden of consciousness:

...grace returns after knowledge has gone through the world of the infinite, in that it appears to best advantage in that human bodily structure that has no consciousness at all – or has infinite consciousness – that is, in the mechanical puppet, or in the God. (Kleist 26)

The puppet has no consciousness of its own, and yet that seems to provide a direct link to nothing less than the divine. Though it may seem a paradox, not having its own consciousness allows the puppet to access the potency of the unconscious.

Harold Segel, whose book *Pinocchio's Progeny* explores the role of the puppet in Modernist Drama, notes that Kleist's celebration of the unconscious is indicative of a Romantic philosophy that viewed the unconscious as the key to true art and creativity.<sup>26</sup> He also suggests that the essay had an influence on author E.T.A Hoffmann and may have inspired the short story *Der Sandmann (The Sandman)*.<sup>27</sup> This short story in turn provides much of the evidence for Freud's theories on the uncanny, and for his claim that the experience is caused by the surfacing of the repressed unconscious. Tracing back the analysis of the uncanny from several angles leads again and again to this story, a kind of nexus where Freud, Jentsch, puppets and childhood anxiety all intersect. For this reason, I depart from the production for a moment to consider this influential story in greater detail. This detour,

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<sup>26</sup> "Kleist's essay on the marionette evidences the Romantic belief in the cognitive and creative superiority of the unconscious over the conscious" (Segel 15).

<sup>27</sup> I can't resist commenting on the uncanny doubling by which the author studied by Freud shares the same last name with the original author of *Schockheaded Peter*.

however, will ultimately lead us directly back to the performance, revealing the main value of a performed uncanny along the way.

### **Puppets and *The Sandman* – Freud reading Hoffmann**

Hoffmann's *The Sandman* is largely considered to be iconic of the uncanny, and for good reason. It's a bizarre and contorted little tale. The protagonist, Nathaniel, endures a series of strange events which lead to his undoing, and for which the narrative offers conflicting explanations. While attending to his studies at school, Nathaniel encounters an ominous person by the name of Coppola who fills him with dread. He believes Coppola to be a duplicate of a figure from his past, the lawyer Coppelius, a generally charmless individual who used to visit his father after the children had gone to bed. As a child, Nathaniel came to associate Coppelius with the 'Sandman' of the nursery maid's folktales, a nightmarish spirit who would come to children at night to rob them of their eyes. Coppelius and his father would perform strange rituals in his father's study late at night. Spying upon them one night, Nathaniel claims that in the dark smoke of their experimental fires he had seen "human faces appearing all around, but without eyes – instead of eyes there were hideous black cavities" (ETA Hoffmann 91). He further claims that Coppelius discovered the little spy behind the curtain and threatened to remove his eyes, but his father protested. The boy collapsed into unconsciousness. Some time later, his father died in an explosion in his study, while engaged in his evening mysteries – Nathaniel has blamed Coppelius for his father's death ever since. Encountering in Coppola the sinister figure of his childhood fears, Nathaniel plunges into despair and paranoia, which he confides to his fiancé Clara, and her brother, his beloved childhood friend. They endeavor to pull him from this darkness, and to convince him that the evil he recollects was invented in the confusion of his child's mind.

Nathaniel struggles to accept their claim that there are perfectly natural explanations for what took place. The next time he meets Coppola, he attempts to engage with him normally. Coppola, a kind of optician/salesman, pitches Nathaniel various glasses and seeing aids. Nathaniel purchases one – a spyglass. He then looks through it into the window of his neighbor and teacher, Professor Spalanzani, at the figure of his daughter Olympia. Though he had often noticed her and wondered at her beauty and her stillness, Nathaniel's affection for Clara prevents him from developing any real interest in Olympia, until this moment. Upon seeing her through the spyglass, something about his sight is transformed, and he falls in love. He courts her, forgetting all responsibilities to Clara, to the point of pursuing a formal engagement, an arrangement which seemingly thrills her father. At the moment he intends to propose however, he comes across Spalanzani and Coppola in a violent argument. They wrestle over the figure of Olympia, pulling her now lifeless form between them as each asserts his ownership over her. As he catches a glimpse of her face, Nathaniel sees with horror two black crevices – holes where her eyes should have been. He realizes that she is in fact an automaton, designed by Spalanzani and for whom Coppola had provided a set of bewitching eyes, eyes he has now reclaimed. Nathaniel spirals into madness.

The story offers one last twist. In time, Nathaniel regains his sanity, and returns to his beloved Clara. While out together with her brother, they climb to the top of the town hall tower to have a look at the countryside. In order to get a look at something odd in the distance, Nathaniel reaches into his pocket and produces the spyglass that he had purchased from Coppola. Upon gazing through it, he is seized again by madness. Yelling at Clara to “Spin, puppet, spin!” he attempts to throw her off the tower (ETA Hoffmann 123). As her brother rushes to Clara's rescue, a crowd gathers below – the lawyer Coppelius appears among them. Chuckling, he declares that Nathaniel “will soon come down by himself” (ETA

Hoffmann 124). Seeing his nemesis below, Nathaniel abandons his attack on Clara and leaps to his own destruction.

Ernst Jentsch, Freud's only acknowledged predecessor in the study of the uncanny, found this story of *The Sandman* particularly revealing when developing his own ideas on the matter in 1906. Jentsch posited that the uncanny results from what he called "psychical uncertainty" and that one source in particular could reliably create this effect: "namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" (Jentsch 11). He adds that "E.T.A. Hoffmann has repeatedly made use of this psychological artifice with success" as *The Sandman* demonstrates. In the story, Nathaniel's friend Siegmund directly articulates what is uncanny about Olympia in such terms:

She might be called beautiful if her eyes were not so completely lifeless, I could even say sightless. She walks with a curiously measured gait; every movement seems as if controlled by clockwork. When she plays and sings it is with the unpleasant soulless regularity of a machine, and she dances in the same way. We have come to find this Olympia quite uncanny; we would like to have nothing to do with her; it seems to us that she is only acting like a living creature, and yet there is some reason for that which we cannot fathom. (ETA Hoffmann 116)

Nathaniel expresses no doubt that Olympia is a human being, and that his love for her is real. The story's narrator, like Nathaniel's own friend Siegmund, casts suspicion on that assessment, creating for the reader the doubt Nathaniel does not feel. Siegmund even suggests that while not being quite human, she seems to have strange and incomprehensible motivations of her own, her own "reasons" for "acting like" a living creature. If her humanity is an act, then whatever consciousness she does own is duplicitous, dangerous, even malevolent.

For Freud, the theory of "intellectual uncertainty" is an insufficient explanation of the story's effect, but in order to critique Jentsch's claim, he begins from the same starting point.

He offers his own interpretation of *The Sandman*, and argues that it is not the doll that is the source of the tale's uncanny effect, but rather the figure of the Sandman/Coppelius/Coppola, and the violence done towards eyes. He notes, "The study of dreams, fantasies and myths has taught us also that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration" (Freud 139). He further argues that the role of the Sandman figure in the tale is to impede the progress of Nathaniel's love-life, validating the "relation between fear for the eyes and fear of castration" (140). This infantile fear, repressed in adulthood, manifests as the destruction of eyes. Freud concludes that the uncanny is that species of the frightening in which "something that has been repressed... now returns" (147). The remainder of his essay works to apply the epiphany drawn from *The Sandman* to other instances of the uncanny (with varying degrees of success).

*Shockheaded Peter* does seem to cohere with Freud's claim that the uncanny is based in repression. In addition to the theatrical framework already mentioned, the creators of the production also add a second internal framework to the stories taken from Hoffmann's book. After Julian Bleach's prologue, the action begins by introducing a Mother and Father who have long awaited the arrival of a baby. One day, he finally arrives, their baby boy. (The puppet baby is delivered via a giant puppet stork.) The parents are overjoyed; they bubble and coo. They awe at his little face and its resemblance to their own – "He has your chin! He has your brow!" They peel back his blanket, and recoil in horror. This child cannot possibly be theirs; there has been some mistake. This baby has horrible unkempt hair surrounding him like a wiry cloud, his uncut fingernails radiate from him like the roots of a tree. This child is a monster – more weed than baby.

He is shockheaded Peter. And his parents do what any good Victorian couple would. They pry up the floorboards and bury him below. For the rest of the evening, in between the

stories of Fidgety Phillip and Starving Augustus, we watch as his influence seeps up from underneath.

It does indeed *seem* an overt allegory of Freudian repression. The drama of this family continues, interspersed with the individual anecdotes of each of the other unfortunate children. These internal stories also encourage a Freudian understanding. Perhaps even more famous than the story of Peter is the story of little Suck-a-Thumb, otherwise known as Conrad. As Jacques and the Tiger Lillies sing his tragic little ballad, the cast acts out the story. The part of Conrad is played by a twisted marionette with two great oversized thumbs on his cramped hands. His face is long, and his eyes and mouth are spacious, making it easy for the child-puppet to insert his thumbs directly into his mouth for oral gratification. His mother (presented by Tamzin Griffin) admonishes the boy to keep his thumbs out of his mouth while she is away, or she warns, the Scissor Man will come to cut them off. She goes out, his thumbs go in. One of the many doors in the set opens, and out leaps Bleach with a set of giant scissors. The Scissor Man pounces upon the puppet-boy, snapping at his hands. Each thumb pops off like an overripe plum. Conrad's mother returns as the puppet collapses on the floor. The puppeteers pull two fountains of red fabric from each of his hands – the child bleeds to death.

It hardly requires a demonic spyglass to see Conrad as an alternative version of Nathaniel. The removal of thumbs equates easily to a kind of castration, especially when the act culminates in an ejaculation of red fabric blood. Peter and Conrad seem then, to be literal examples of the uncanny as Freud saw it. And yet seeing them as *examples* of the uncanny does not give sufficient attention to the fact that they are disturbing in and of themselves. These puppets are not just metaphors, they themselves are the uncanny, incarnate. Kenneth Gross would argue that puppets are always necessarily uncanny. His book *Puppet* is an

extended meditation and reflection on the animated inanimate. He subtitles the book, *An Essay on Uncanny Life*, thus suggesting that the uncanny is a quality inherent to a puppet's very existence. He sees that condition as inescapable:

The link with the dead, with the realm of the uncanny, the threshold realm of things unknown or repressed yet half-revealed, can be felt in the most secular of puppets, in the impression of their dead life, the sense of will and power in them despite their being objects to be manipulated by others. (Gross 23)

On this stage, the puppets may represent Freud's interpretation, but their effect on the audience is not so easily digested. The first appearance of Peter, wriggling free from his swaddling blanket and writhing in his parents' arms, turns the stomach. His mottled skin sags like burlap, and his wiry hair envelopes him like a radioactive dust bunny. The protruding nails, brittle and scaly, move gently in the air like the legs of an upturned spider. In Hoffmann's book, the story of Struwwelpeter is just one of several. And his horrible hair and hands seem to be a matter of choice, a refusal to keep himself clean that merits punishment. But in the stage version, the baby arrives with these unfortunate qualities already in place, making these features innate. In this context, the hair and fingernails that will not stop growing of their own accord reek of death, of the life that continues in the corpse.<sup>28</sup> In the course of the whole evening, shockheaded Peter is the one child who does not die. He does not die, because, it seems, he is already dead. Are we as audience members not also relieved when his parents shove him under the floor?

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<sup>28</sup> The idea that our hair and nails continue to grow after death is in fact a myth which has been disproven. But the idea lingers, and for good reason. We have a conflicted relationship with our hair and nails: we treat them as a part of us, but know full well that they are not like the rest of our organic body. We cut them and feel no pain. They are themselves dead, lacking in vitality and sensation, and yet still somehow connected to us. And though not actually alive, they grow, seemingly of their own accord. The effort we exert in "aestheticizing" them – painting, cutting, trimming, shaving – is part of a constant battle against being overwhelmed by these inorganic protuberances.



## The Irrepressible Puppet: *Cixous Reading Freud Reading Hoffmann*

The presence of these puppets on the stage is not so much a representation of Freud's uncanny as an implicit challenge to it. Though his analysis of the uncanny begins with a puppet, with the automaton Olympia from Hoffmann's tale, he moves swiftly away from her to address the subject he finds more interesting, namely the Sandman himself, and his link to repression. Hélène Cixous famously notes this slight of hand by which Freud supplants the "Unheimliche of the doll with the Sand-Man" (532). Cixous calls attention to Freud's essay as uncanny in and of itself. She explores the convoluted text by focusing not only on what it reveals, but also what it conceals: "with special attention paid to what is produced and what escapes in the unfolding of a text" (Cixous 525). By exposing what the text hides, Cixous' investigation performs the uncanny, making the familiar unfamiliar.

Cixous suggests that, in his eagerness to address repression, Freud in fact "represses" the doll itself, which of course requires that she will again soon return. And return she does, but only after Freud has provided his conclusion that the uncanny is our repressed past coming back to haunt us. He works now to force the automaton into parameters he has already created. Noting that children "are not afraid of their dolls coming to life" (Freud 141), he suggests that in this case, the uncanny may result not from a repressed fear, but a repressed wish. He notes that "this sounds like a contradiction, but possibly it is just a complication" (Freud 141) and then moves on, leaving the doll to dance into ambiguity. Freud covers up the enigmatic function of the puppet for the uncanny in much the way the production of *Shockheaded Peter* buries the titular character. It is not Freudian repression that this production allegorizes, but rather Freud's own repression – of puppets, of the dead, of the animated inanimate.

Cixous goes on to argue that Freud's avoidance of the doll constitutes a rejection of theatre and the theatrical. Freud uses psycho-analysis to eliminate Jentsch's "uncertainty" and declares that this process removes all possible doubt as to the true meaning of the story. His interpretation devalues Olympia as it elevates Nathaniel, and converts the Sandman into a direct allegory of repression. With this interpretive act, Cixous explains, "the two great and extraordinary figures are supplanted, and with them Hoffmann's theater" (535). What Freud's essay offers in place of theatricality is the act of "reading" – the interpretation and analysis of a text. The process is itself uncanny – as Nicholas Royle explains in a chapter on the Sandman and its interpretations, "there is no reading that is not uncannily blind to its own procedures, presuppositions, effects or discoveries" (Royle 40). In his essay, Freud presents a "reading" of Hoffmann's tale, but it is in fact a new version of the story, transformed by his priorities. It conceals and deprioritizes the material that he prefers not to handle. In his summary of the story, he himself becomes an author. Rather than pulling back the curtain on Hoffmann's story, Freud has simply made a new curtain. His analysis of the uncanny, rather than removing doubt, simply restores it in a new position, inspiring us to doubt what Freud claims is so clear. In this cycle of reading and writing, the uncanny becomes like a snake eating its own tail, an endless process of substitution and supplantation.<sup>29</sup>

Cixous offers an alternate approach – rather than simply reading Hoffmann's story as a text, she attempts to engage with it as a kind of theatre. She does this not only for Hoffmann, but for Freud as well: she begins her own exploration by recasting his essay as "a kind of puppet theater in which real dolls or fake dolls, real and simulated life, are manipulated by a sovereign but capricious stage setter" (525). She concludes that it is the text

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<sup>29</sup> In providing my own synopsis of the story above, I realize I am joining in the seemingly endless cycle, becoming another doppelganger of Freud. No doubt, there are dirty little secrets to my interpretation as well.

of “The Uncanny” itself that is dead, while masquerading as alive, interactive, mutual. This is its “theatrical secret.” She thereby flips the essay inside out – rather than containing the phenomenon of the living doll neatly within Freud’s theory of the resurfacing repressed, the entire investigation represents an animated inanimate. Cixous equates that process – of investing the dead with life – with theatre itself. It cannot be denied of course, that calling his essay “puppet theater” is itself a reading – an interpretation. But Cixous’s approach offers one critical difference – the ability to explore how this subject matter feels, *as well as* what it means. The gesture demonstrates Cixous’ commitment to engage with the essay both for what it *says* and what it *does*. Approaching these texts as performances, however richly envisioned, can not however escape the realm of metaphor. The production of *Shockheaded Peter* on the other hand, provides the change to engage *actual* theatre as theatre: to consider the direct impact of bodies, objects and spatiality.

### ***Peter’s Puppets – On Beyond Reading***

In performance, the puppet is more than a mere sign, more than a symbol to be read. Even as it “represents’, it also presents itself as a tactile, physical object, one whose literal existence creates a tension with what it is intended to be. While puppets in general have an uncanny element, Julian Crouch’s puppets are particularly so. The products of his puppet design are actually quite diverse, but if there is one unifying element to his work, it is the vaguely demonic quality to all he does. Recalling a particular production of *Macbeth* for which he designed masks, he notes that the “witches were also the murderers.” So he pondered, “if a witch were going to do a murder and make a mask... what kind of mask

[would she] make?”<sup>30</sup> This question guided his choice of material: he began with tree bark and grass, and those earth-bound elements informed the shape and design of the facial features.

There is a kind of witchery, a dark magic, in all his work. In his designs, he invests the inanimate with life like a modern day Frankenstein. This is, of course, the foundation of all puppetry, but Crouch makes no attempt to conceal this process – quite the opposite, he exploits it. He even claims that the vast majority of his creations are not “pure puppets as people know them.” In an interview conducted in 2013, he explained, “masks, body extensions, scenic elements and objects as puppetry are more my line.”<sup>31</sup> The distinction between a puppet and an object *as* puppet is key to understanding Crouch’s aesthetic. It is hard to know where to draw the line between wood that has been carved to look like a boy, and wood that has been carved to look like wood that looks like a boy, but Crouch is far more interested in the latter than in the former. He takes the humblest of objects and gives them life. In 2013-14, Crouch collaborated with artist/musician Saskia Lane on *Birdheart* – a production of what they called “animated theatre.” They built an entire narrative on a character played by a piece of crumpled brown paper. Even when his puppets take a more recognizably anthropomorphic form, they retain their connection to the materiality of objects. For the highly acclaimed production of *Satyagraha* he designed for the Metropolitan Opera (a collaboration with Phelim McDermott and the Improbable Theatre) the epic and oversized puppets were made of newspaper, with print still visible to the eye. The masks he created of bark and woven grass for *Macbeth* and also for the Met’s *Enchanted Island* looked like ghoulish faces, but also like growths that might have somehow, insidiously emerged from the ground, or appeared on the side of a tree. The result is something between man-made creation and

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<sup>30</sup> See the YouTube interview: “BRIC studio visit with Julian Crouch.”

<sup>31</sup> From an interview with Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

natural formation. His work conveys the eerie sensation of camouflage, of an object trying to hide what it truly is.

Crouch's approach provides further justification for the label "junk opera." In searching for the right material for each project, often it is the material which comes first, and the story which follows. Whatever substance he may be working with, he assigns it the status of junk even as he transforms it for a new purpose. He attempts to "make things to look as though I found them rather than made them."<sup>32</sup> He often works with found objects, but he also wants his puppets to behave like such "found objects." For *Shockheaded Peter*, he took this process quite literally: "I made a lot of body parts – heads, hands – which were pretty much then 'auditioned' to go into the production. So, it's like using found objects; only, they're objects you made but you didn't know why at the time."<sup>33</sup> They may have been his creations, but in rehearsal, the objects themselves determined what they needed to be for the story. For Crouch, these objects have their own will, their own intentionality. They are part of that breed of matter that Bruno Schulz identifies in *The Street of Crocodiles*. That story as well is told from the perspective of a child, but the fantasies we encounter belong to his father, who would spend hours recounting the mystical power of matter. His great epiphany is that "[t]here is no dead matter... lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life" (Schulz 31). Schulz presents matter's inherent resistance as a tragic emotional life. The narrator's father can hear the silent protest emerging from waxwork figures and mannequins: "Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed

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<sup>32</sup> See the YouTube interview: "BRIC studio visit with Julian Crouch."

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from interview with Tom Wicker in Exeunt Magazine.

form which is no more than a parody?” (Schulz 35). In their refusal to abandon their original shape, Crouch’s objects echo that cry.

The retention of their own essential life as objects does not prevent the audience from viewing the puppets as characters – rather Crouch believes that it has the opposite effect. While working on a later show (*The Devil and Mr. Punch*), Crouch reminisced about *Shockheaded Peter* in a conversation with Philip Bither. He recalled how the audience accepted and even embraced the inherent “object”ness of the puppets. If they could still see the shape of the rags that made up Conrad’s body, it meant that the audience had to complete the unfinished illusion. They converted those rags into a boy willingly and actively. Crouch explained that the audience was the one “birthing the image.”<sup>34</sup> They became that much more invested in the character’s reality because they themselves had made it. Crouch was not perturbed in the slightest by the fact that as a puppet, Conrad was “not well-crafted.” The audience looked at him alongside the two puppeteers controlling him, and they knew not to “see” the puppeteers, they knew “it’s not a load of rag, that’s a boy.” The resulting violence done to this body registered directly upon the spectator’s own. Crouch recalled, “when we cut the thumbs off this creature, you could feel people...” He broke off, sucking air rapidly into his lungs. “... And then they would laugh.... You could feel their thumbs flying off.”<sup>35</sup>

Neuroscience supports the idea that we can actually project our own body image onto another body or figure, that our sense of our own bodies (which we consider to be some kind of constant) is actually quite fluid and flexible. Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran has a series of

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Philip Bither, on YouTube.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Philip Bither, on YouTube.

sinfully simple experiments demonstrating this, which he shares with child-like glee.<sup>36</sup> The first simply requires three willing participants. The guinea pig – person A – positions himself facing person B. A third individual, C, stands to the side of person A. C takes A’s hand, and uses it in to tap out a pattern on the nose of person B. Simultaneously she uses her other hand to tap out an identical pattern on the nose of person A. “After thirty or forty seconds, if you’re lucky, you will develop the uncanny illusion that you are touching your nose out there or that your nose has been dislocated” (Ramachandran 59). Or an even “spookier” illusion, requiring a small cardboard “wall,” a rubber hand, and a volunteer. Position your own hand out of sight behind the cardboard wall, and the dummy hand in view, but in the same orientation. The volunteer strokes both your own hand and the dummy hand simultaneously. “Within seconds you will experience the stroking sensation as arising from the dummy hand” (Ramachandran 60). Ramachandran again describes the feeling as specifically, “uncanny.”

These tricks juxtapose an undeniable physical sensation with the equally undeniable awareness that the sensation is impossible. What the mind knows and what the body feels cannot be reconciled. Even more shocking, Ramachandran found he could generate these uncanny sensation with inanimate objects “that bear no physical resemblance to human body parts” (60). Though actual physical touch is a key component to these experiments, the investment of imagination performed by the audience at *Shockheaded Peter* creates a similar tactile relationship, drawing their bodily selves into the realm of the puppet. Done as a party gag, or Halloween entertainment, these experiments may seem harmless, but they call into

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<sup>36</sup> Ramachandran has a reputation for demonstrating complex cognitive phenomena with the simplest of experiments (see Ramachandran 46-49 for a discussion of his famous mirror box experiments). These experiments are in fact actually little performances, a kind of rudimentary interactive theatre. They involve a few simple props conveying an action through staging.

question basic beliefs about our minds and bodies. When these results are generated outside the context of a scientist's magic trick, the impact is all the more disturbing.

The story of Conrad may sound uncanny when it is told. And interpreting the encounter through Freud suggests some of what is at work. But when performed by a puppet, especially such a rudimentary one, the story becomes something we feel in our bodies, and Freud's interpretations do not explain away the visceral shudder. The uncanny in performance speaks to our bodies. The fact that this production also addresses our minds does not diminish that direct corporeality of the experience; rather it confirms it. Explanation does not mitigate the fear the uncanny generates. How is it that puppets create this potent visceral response? The question leads us back to their relationship to our childhood, but that relationship becomes more intimate and complex as it is explored.

### **Looking at Puppets: The Developmental Perspective**

The puppets of Shockheaded Peter are descendants of the Victorian puppet world – in Crouch's hands, a kind of deviant and deformed descendant, but relatives nevertheless. One particular trait that they retain is their endless transformations: they lose their thumbs and heads, grow fingernails and hair, and turn themselves inside out. These types of transformations were typical of a specific kind of Victorian puppet – the fantoccini, or trick puppets, whose body parts could shrink and stretch, who could convert from one thing into another. Kenneth Gross lists various examples:

...the marionette that loses and juggles its own head; the skeleton whose bones fly apart and then neatly, mysteriously reassemble themselves; the four dancers fixed to a bar, executing perfectly mirroring kicks and pirouettes; a courtier-puppet whose neck by turns elongates and shuts itself up; the puppet mother who pulls dozens of puppet



children from her pocket; the woman whose wide skirts rise over her head to become a balloon. (Gross 34)<sup>37</sup>

In *Shockheaded Peter*, the tale of Harriet the pyromaniac seems a direct reference to this kind of stage magic. As she catches fire, she – like the balloon/woman puppet (or like a shameless two-year old) – lifts her skirts gradually over her head. Underneath her skirts, she reveals billowing petticoats of tulle and crepe paper in crimson and orange. As these shake and blow, they become the fire that consumes the young girl entirely. She then disappears through a trap door. Only her empty red shoes, filled with ashes, remain to mark the place of her incineration.<sup>38</sup>

Such puppets, Gross writes, “have a great and strange poetry, partly because their movements mirror some very basic fantasies we have about persons, bodies and thoughts – our sense, for instance, of the independent life, even the mutual antagonism, of our limbs, our sense that we are both more and less than wholes, that we give birth to things alien to ourselves, that we hide one personality, creature, or sex in another” (Gross 34-35). These very basic fantasies, of course, point back to Freud. It is certainly possible to see a nearly comic Freudian element to Harriet’s story, where-by her “shameful” act of playing with matches becomes linked to exposing what you have beneath your skirt. Repression converts the act of sexual consummation into an act of pyrotechnic consumption.

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the Fantoccini, see chapter 7 of John McCormick’s *The Victorian Marionette Theater*.

<sup>38</sup> There is something uncanny and also tragic about abandoned shoes, especially children’s shoes – not only in Hemingway’s (possibly apocryphal) 6 word novel: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Their diminutive size gives them a certain magic. But it also has something to do with the transience of childhood – a period which moves so quickly shoes are barely worn before they are abandoned. Artist Doris Salcedo created a haunting installation in 1992-93 called *Atrabilious*, which featured women’s shoes, either alone or paired, contained in boxes and sealed behind a waxy translucent skin. The installation was a response to the Colombian Civil War, and the shoes were “stand-ins for the missing bodies and evoke reliquaries for the remains of saints.” See the MoMa website for more information on her exhibit.

But, again, these puppets do much more than simply enact a kind of Freudian fantasy. Recent developmental psychology reveals that fantasies like these are rooted in our childhood, but not because of repression. Rather they evoke our childhood perspective of bodies and objects and how they behave. One of our first tasks as infants is to begin “imposing order on what William James called the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ of [our] senses” (Gopnik et al 65). *The Scientist in the Crib* by cognitive scientists/psychologists Alison Gopnick, Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl – a comprehensive overview of recent discoveries in this field – begins to explain how children perform this task. Newborns are attracted to edges and lines (particularly stripes), and they use these as markers for how to begin to divide the “continuous visual image... into separate things” (Gopnik et al 64). An even more potent clue as to how to distinguish the unique objects of the world seems to be motion. Infants recognize that “When things move together on the same path, they must be part of the same object” (Gopnik et al 66). Psychologists refer to this as “the principle of common fate.” Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl offer the following example of the principle in action:

If you show very young babies a video of a static Big Bird that then explodes into its separately defined parts, they won't be perturbed. Because all the parts had separate edges anyway, they may, for all the babies know, have been separate objects to begin with. But if you show them Big Bird moving first, so that they see that all the parts of the object move together, and then show them exploding Big Bird, they'll look much longer and more attentively, as if they recognize that something is wrong. (66)

The trick puppet, like Big Bird, establishes its unity through motion. The naughty children come on stage and dance. Even though we see the strings or the puppeteer, the puppet still declares its own essential integrity. It is then all the more disturbing when it loses its head or thumbs, or inverts, or transforms into something completely foreign.

The puppets of *Shockheaded Peter* do far more than merely represent children. Instead, they return the audience to the position of BEING children. They act as a distorting lens

through which we reexperience the formulative perspective of our childhood.<sup>39</sup> They suggest that there is something fundamental about that perspective to the uncanny experience.

### Looking at Children – *Freud Reading Childhood*

Of course, Freud also recognized the importance of our childhood experience to the uncanny. As Hugh Haughton suggests in his introduction to Freud's *The Uncanny*, this essay is but another example of how "Freud sees the answer to the riddles of adult life in childhood" (xxix). As discussed above, his key example of the uncanny as the repressed surfacing comes from *The Sandman*, and in particular, his psychoanalysis of Nathaniel's childhood memories. From his "reading" of those memories, Freud produces the 'revelation' that the story's ocular obsession results from Nathaniel's unconscious infantile castration complex. Freud's theory of the unconscious and repression itself is based on the claim that the way we see the world as children shapes our mature minds. But his conception requires that youthful perspective to transform as we enter our conscious adult lives. Childhood desires and fears are "repressed" and covered over as we become socially mature, and once there, they become the source of unconscious motivations. Freud directs our attention back to our childhood selves to explain

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<sup>39</sup> *Shockheaded Peter* actually contains a seemingly literal depiction of this "distorting lens of childhood." In one interlude, Julian Bleach appears before us holding the lens of a large magnifying glass. As he speaks, he holds the glass before various features of his face, enlarging at one moment his lips, teeth and tongue, and at another his looming eyeball. He portrays his face as flexible and malleable, much like a puppet. This facial distortion may seem familiar. Even newborns recognize faces – more importantly, they demonstrate the understanding that the face they see on someone else is inherently like their own. Without ever having seen a mirror, an infant will imitate the facial manipulations of adults around them. Stick out your tongue, and baby will stick his out back at you. Meltzoff demonstrated this type of behavior in infants as young as forty-two minutes (Gopnik et al 30). These imitations demonstrate that babies are born with an innate kinesthesia that allows them to connect their bodies to the bodies of others. That kinesthesia seems to focus on certain facial features – the eyes and the mouth for example – those with particularly useful evolutionary functions.

the mysteries of our unconscious. The child and the unconscious are to a certain extent linked, if not actually equated.<sup>40</sup>

But for Freud, the child was also a riddle. He believed that the only means of access to our childhood perceptions is memory, and our memories are of course flawed. In his essay, *Screen Memories*, he writes:

No one doubts that our earliest childhood experiences have left indelible traces on our inner selves; but when we question our *memory* as to what impressions are destined to influence us till the end of our lives, it comes up with either nothing at all or a relatively small number of isolated recollections, often of questionable or perplexing significance. (Freud 3)

He develops a theory for understanding the adult mind by analyzing the enigmatic traces of our childhood memories, suggesting that these, like dreams or “works of fiction” (14), must be interpreted and investigated for their deeper meaning. This interpretation is an intellectual, even disembodied, endeavor. We produce an idea of ourselves as children, but only for the purpose of understanding ourselves as adults. For Freud, the child is fundamental but also functional: a specimen to be dissected. In this way, Freud’s psychoanalysis does what Julian Bleach declares *Shockheaded Peter* will do – it offers up inappropriate childhoods for the consumption of voracious adults.

This mental exercise is again an act of reading, the sort of work Cixous exposed in Freud’s essay. Psychoanalysis, in making our childhood selves a tool for unwrapping the unconscious, interprets them, manipulates them, handles them like symbols of hidden

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<sup>40</sup> Freud’s obsession with children is indicative of a specific historical mindset. Harold Segel has suggested that a hallmark of the modern mentality was a fascination with the child, which he locates at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “the world of the child became newly attractive to artists as a source of opposition, and an antidote, to the conservatism and traditionalism of bourgeois culture” (Segel 37). Whether a pre-existing fascination with children inspired Freud or whether his theories developed in tandem with the cultural moment, his ideas cohere with the perceived value of the child figure. Segel explains that the child was idealized as “prerational” (Segel 38), thus linking him again to the unconscious and also to puppets.

meaning. To Freud, the figure of the child was a puppet, a marionette, waiting for the psychoanalyst to come and pull his strings. And just as Freud failed to acknowledge that a puppet might have independent life, he also failed to imagine that our childhood reality might extend beyond the reach of his investigative eye. He seemed to believe that the puppet-child could somehow be divided from the adult mind and presented as a performance for his or her rational understanding – as though psychoanalysis could deliver the adult to clarity and maturity by simply cutting the strings.

### **The Puppet-Child – From Repression to Play**

If Freud treats our childhood selves as puppets, *Shockheaded Peter* both incarnates that fantasy and inverts it. The puppets are themselves, children. Though there is always an element of the juvenile about a puppet, in this context, a puppet that is actually a child requires a second look.

The most famous child puppet, perhaps, is “Pinocchio,” invented by Carlo Collodi and popularized by Disney. Kenneth Gross begins his book of ruminations on the puppet with a conversation on this very figure. He speaks with Giuliano de Marsanich, a sculptor, puppeteer and curator of a gallery in Italy that preserves a unique type of detritus: puppets, toys, and games. The gallery as reliquary or mausoleum, it contains “souvenirs of someone else’s childhood... relics of forgotten households” (Gross 14,15). Giuliano, within this playroom of undead children, frequently brings up Collodi’s “Pinocchio,” whose spirit pervades the space:

There is a spirit of uncanny play and grotesquery in the book. Pinocchio in his actions is a charged, haunted thing, and the book’s satiric humor is joined to something rare in Italian writing, Giuliano suggests, ‘un mondo gotico’ – a Gothic world – full of death and menace, shadow selves and doppelgangers, a world such as is more familiar in writings by Hoffmann, Hawthorne, or Poe. (Gross 19)

Pinocchio in Collodi's story is a far more threatening figure than he becomes in the Disney version of the tale. According to Gross, he "becomes an incarnation of the dangerous spirit of the puppet" (19). Puppets are made to be manipulated, children to be disciplined. But when combined together, somehow, they become untenable – a force that cannot be contained.

A brief anecdote: The current production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera replaces the character of Cio-Cio-San's child with a puppet. Some find the puppet-child incredibly moving – some have greater difficulty connecting to his emotional reality. Others have a different response entirely. In one recent revival, the role of Cio-Cio-San was played by an up-and-coming Chinese soprano who exhibited a nearly hysterical fear of the puppet. She burst into tears when he was brought into her presence. In the role, she had to interact with the child – place him on her lap and take him by the hand, but initially she was unable to even make eye contact with him. It took several solo sessions and conversations with the puppeteer who manipulated the child before she could look at him, much less take him into a maternal embrace.

Many members of the opera's staff were surprised by her fear. But perhaps we are the ones who have become too much at ease in the presence of that blank-faced hollow-eyed child. Kenneth Gross traces a near-demonic intensity and intentionality through many puppet traditions:

Even these bits of odd, toylike making remind me of the fact that in many of their earliest manifestations, and still in certain Asian traditions, in Japan or Java, puppets were brought to life precisely to provide homes for the souls of the dead... The puppet might also channel the presence of demonic spirits, or act as a vehicle to contain energies at once creative and destructive. (Gross 22)

The puppet appears to have a mind of its own, and that mind is somewhat sinister. For whatever reason, that darkness seems enhanced when the puppet takes the form of a child. In ghost stories and horror movies, the child doll is a recurring figure of possession. Within

recent popular culture, the figure has appeared often, from the murderous doll of the grotesque *Child's Play* series to the 2014 film *Annabelle* (based off a purportedly true story).

Even Giuliano, who revels in Pinnochio's devilish and rebellious nature, is wary of more innocent looking child dolls. While visiting him, Gross observes that his collection of so many toys and puppets contains no "traditional children's dolls." Giuliano responds that,

such dolls, with their smooth faces, chubby cheeks, and glass eyes, their static, kitschy innocence, disturb him too much. They carry too strong an air of death about them. He explains that dolls of this sort were originally created in the nineteenth century as memorial portraits of dead children. They are born from the tomb, "nascono dalla tomba," he says with quiet emphasis. (Gross 21)

For all they are often associated, children and puppets are actually diametrically opposed in many ways. Childhood is a period of transformation. Puppets are static. Childhood is ephemeral. Puppets exist in the realm of eternal time.<sup>41</sup> Childhood is vitality, life, animation. Puppets are dead. When these two realms combine, horror ensues.

In Collodi's tale, as in the Disney story, the puppet does long to become a real boy.

And this process, by which child-puppet transforms to real child, "emblemizes the passage

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<sup>41</sup> The collision of these two irreconcilable temporalities is perhaps nowhere more exaggerated (or more painful) than in Spielberg's 2001 film *AI*, which is itself a kind of futuristic retelling of the Pinocchio story. The film tells the story of David, a child robot, who is designed to "imprint" upon his owner/mother, Monica. For her, he is a kind of surrogate for her biological child, Martin, whose illness requires that he be kept in suspended animation. She replaces one child frozen in time with another. But when Martin returns, the love she feels for her real son eclipses her affection for David, who no longer has a clear purpose. Like Pinocchio, with whom he identifies, David longs to become a real boy, so that Monica will then love him like she does Martin. The family comes to view David's obsessive adoration as dangerous. Monica abandons her mechanical son at the side of the road, like an unwanted dog. But David's love and his hope do not diminish. He pursues his singular obsession to be real, to be loved, without end. He clings to this dream, even after it is clear that he can never become human, even after his mother has passed away, for centuries and centuries beyond even the age of human beings. Such infinite longing – unceasing, unrequited – transforms the film from science fiction to tragedy. The imagination can conceive of no respite for David, no real recovery, because the boy cannot grow. (Some might view the film's coda involving futuristic/alien technology and temporary resurrection as a kind of solution to this problem. To me, the coda, which feels both forced and false, indicates only Spielberg's own inability to accept the horrific scenario his own film created.)

of youth into adulthood” (Segel 42). That process is further identified as a “repression”: “Our idea of maturity and a workable social order necessitates the repression of the child whose amoral vitality and primordially represents a threat to that idea.”<sup>42</sup> The puppet is repressed to become a child; the child is repressed to become an adult; and the Mother and Father of *Shockheaded Peter* cover over the unpleasant reality of their infant.

Julian Crouch and Phelim McDermott certainly had repression on the mind while creating this production. In a conversation with Crouch in 2013, he shared that both he and McDermott had been reading Robert Bly’s *Sibling Society* at the time. I was rather surprised to learn of this particular source of inspiration, considering Bly’s message. His premise is that modern society has become a world without adults, an endless parade of unrestrained immature children in adult bodies. In his words, “People don’t bother to grow up, and we are all fish swimming in a tank of half-adults. The rule is: Where repression was before, fantasy will now be; we human beings limp along, running after our own fantasy” (Bly vii). He makes a plea for adulthood, for the restoration of maturity. He finds the loss of authority so disheartening that he seems to be suggesting we all return to a world of repressed (but responsible!) control. For all it murders children, *Shockheaded Peter* does not seem a condemnation of childhood as much as a submersion in child-like play. McDermott and Crouch would seem to be two of the most unlikely advocates for adulthood you might ever meet – men who have dedicated their lives to “play” in the most profound sense – dress-up, improvisation, chaos.

From one angle, perhaps it makes sense. Bly presents childhood in Freudian terms – as dangerous, unbridled passion. His “sibling society” is a world driven by competition and

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<sup>42</sup> From Nicolas J. Perella’s introduction to Collodi’s “The Adventures of Pinocchio.” Also quoted in Segel 42.



desire. He equates the passions of childhood with the monstrous appetite of the giant ogre of Jack and the beanstalk. The children of *Shockheaded Peter* are monstrous, just as Bly would imagine. Demonic, possessed, terrifying. Bly seems (as difficult as this may be to believe) to be arguing in FAVOR of repression as a method for restraining the little demons we each have inside of us. *Shockheaded Peter* does enjoy portraying repression. On the surface, it even celebrates it. But it also mocks these things even as it revels in them. Bleach directly charges the audience to consider, “What’s under your floorboards?” The show is about revelation rather than repression, and about the futility of attempting to hide our childish selves away in a closet. Perhaps for Crouch and McDermott, the inspiration of Bly’s text was its depiction of childhood and childishness as a danger. Or perhaps it inspired them to challenge, rather than accept, repression as a method for achieving “maturity.” Whatever the creators’ intentions may have been, *Shockheaded Peter* suggests not that we should suppress our childhood demons, but rather that such an attempt is futile.

The story of the “bully boys” depicts just such futility. It contrasts directly to the kind of allegory of maturity that Segel discovers in the tale of *Pinnocchio*, and that Bly reads into Jack and the beanstalk. This song tells of three mischievous little boys, whose antics begins to get on the nerves of the adults around them. As it begins, three nasty looking marionettes drop down from the flies of the theatre into the central playing space. They bob and bounce from knotted strings descending from the darkness above – for once we do not actually see the puppeteers at work. “Tall Agrippa” who lived nearby notices the boys, and warns them to behave, but they ignore him. And so, naturally, he responds by killing all three of them. Their nasty little crimes? Well, Edward – he was “[waving] his flag.” And William, “brought his wooden hoop” and Arthur “brought his toys.” So essentially, the horrible activity in which

they were engaged that justified their deaths? Play. These three die simply for the crime of having been children. It seems that Bly would approve.

One could read the adult's destruction of the child as a kind of condemnation of the childhood impulse. But the actual monster in this scenario seems to be Agrippa, and he produces not maturity, but destruction. In *Shockheaded Peter*, Agrippa is played again by Bleach, and this character becomes another figuration of the Scissor Man. As Jacques sings about the execution of the boys, Bleach appears again with his giant scissors in hand, and neatly snips the strings above each boy's head. Their heads collapse. In this case, Jack does not beat the Giant. The Giant slaughters Jack, rather gleefully. For Pinocchio, losing his strings means becoming a real boy. But for these boys, cutting the strings does not mean transformation. It simply means death.<sup>43</sup>

With their deaths, the puppets of *Shockheaded Peter* assert also their own autonomy – if they can die, then they are in fact alive. And their independent existence demands recognition. To properly apprehend the uncanny effect of this production and its puppets, we have to go deeper still – inside the puppet itself.

**Puppet Embodiment: *And one pill makes you small...*<sup>44</sup>**

In fact, taking us inside the puppet is precisely what the production does. It is not enough that we see these puppets with the eyes of children. The production allows us to see

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<sup>43</sup> Another example, not from *Shockheaded Peter*: puppeteer Philippe Genty performs a beautiful show with Pierrot in which the puppet gradually becomes aware of the person pulling his string. As he realizes in horror that he is a puppet, he rips off each of his strings, one by one, ultimately collapsing into a heap of wood and fabric on the floor. The show essentially portrays a suicide, a strangely assisted suicide, since each action of the puppet is of course, actually performed by the puppeteer. Again, ripping off his strings does not bring the puppet freedom, or maturity or independence. It just grants him death, beyond the power of the puppeteer to resurrect him (at least until his strings are repaired).

<sup>44</sup> With thanks to Jefferson Airplane.

what the puppet sees. *Shockheaded Peter* manipulates the spatial environment of the show in order to achieve precisely that transformation. Throughout, the production gives the viewer the sense that, rather like Alice, we are falling down the rabbit hole. The set is constructed with a heavily forced perspective, such that an actor in the rear-stage seems several feet taller than one at the front. And as the evening progresses, the set deepens – the rear wall flies to reveal an area deeper and smaller still. The scenery develops its own gravity, rather like a black hole. The audience wonders how deep the theater actually is – how far the forced perspective could actually extend.

As the stage penetrates further into the recesses of the backstage, it also recreates itself in miniature. For one story, the tale of the hunter and the hare, our attention is shifted to the upper central window, which opens to reveal a miniature theater that echoes the set itself. There, the cast acts out the story of the hare with hand puppets. Since this miniature theater is a microcosm of the production itself, it too contains a small window, which must contain an even smaller puppet-theater with an even smaller window. And on and on. Like the back of the set that increasingly regresses towards infinity, the process of miniaturization continues, ad nauseum, and extends in both directions (the seemingly life-size production must of course just be a window in some larger unseen theater).

The effect is a dizzying destabilization of space, a series of distortions like a house of mirrors, which challenge our most basic ideas of perception. Gross argues that this type of distortion is inherent in the very puppet itself. He observes that the play of scale in the puppet world is inconsistent: “proportion and number are there subject to other laws” (42). Gross offers as an example from the work of puppeteer Frank Soehnle, who felt “he could almost never make puppets small enough” (Gross 40). In watching one of Soehnle’s shows, Gross witnessed a similarly disorienting descent into realms of the increasingly small, rather like

Russian nesting boxes. Puppets contained within themselves increasingly more delicate and diminutive puppets. Though the puppets were mostly skeletons and cadavers, this generation of increasingly diminishing size suggested a near frantic vitality, puppets “being birthed” by other puppets, life emerging from death. Their decreasing size “seemed to register a greater and greater mystery, a greater and greater power of survival as well” (Gross 40). In thwarting our expectations of space, the puppet also declares its own singular life.

By subjecting the audience to these spatial distortions at the scenic level, *Shockheaded Peter* subsumes us into the puppet’s own world. The presentation of a miniature theatre within the very theatre itself suggests not only an infinity of smaller and smaller theatres. We must also conceive of an infinity of larger theatres, spaces which contain our own theatre as well as our individual existence. We cannot then, remain objective observers; we are literally part of the spectacle. We become linked directly to puppets themselves, for whom space is always relative. The puppet decides and determines the space of the world around it, whether creating increasingly tiny microcosms, or carving epic kingdoms on a large scale.<sup>45</sup> According to Gross “Plays of scale in puppet theater... suggest that we do not yet know the dimensions and limits of what we call life” (47). The puppet theater causes a suspension of our certainty about delineations of space and size, thrusting us back into an infantile mindset, and inserting us into the puppet theater itself.

Having removed our sense of distance and difference, we confront these puppets on their own terms. This transforms our relationship to the miniature puppet theatre, whose performance becomes our very own. The story presented in this diminutive form is central to

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<sup>45</sup> “They are of the smallness of a landscape glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope, near and far at once, or of landscapes seen through a small glass ball – reduced, distended, turned upside down” (Gross 39). I will explore the idea of the miniature further in Chapter 2, on the Quay Brothers.

the production, both in temporal and physical terms. Told with hand puppets and cutouts, it is one of the most simplistic of the evening's anecdotes, but the creative team emphasizes its importance in various ways. In addition to taking place in the miniature puppet theatre directly above the stage, the story of the Hunter and the Hare is the only tale in the whole show to involve the entire cast (with the exception of the framework story of shockheaded Peter himself). Three cast members handle the puppets – the two main puppeteers, alongside Anthony Cairns, the father. The Tiger Lillies, as always, sing the narration. As the story proceeds, Tamzin and Bleach join in the action. During the song's musical bridge, in a neatly virtuosic touch, each and every cast member takes up an instrument and plays along with the band. They adjust their positions so that they occupy every window and door in the show's false proscenium, pounding away at whatever instrument they are capable of playing. After this interlude, they return to storytelling positions. The gesture not only demonstrates the cast's commitment and talents – it draws our focus to the theatrical frame, before restoring it to the window of the puppet tale, further equating the life-size with the miniature.

The story itself might seem an unexpected choice for such a dramatic treatment. This song tells of a hunter pursuing a hare, who takes a little nap while on the hunt. The hare discovers him asleep, and relieves him of his rifle. In a fitting act of retribution, she then reverses the game. She pursues the hunter and shoots him. This is the only story in the whole production which centers around something other than a child. But having thoroughly associated children with our “animal” natures, the substitution is not entirely inappropriate. The story also seems to break away from the established *Shockheaded Peter* paradigm – in which a child misbehaves and is punished with death. Who is being naughty here? The hunter? Or the hare? If the hare, then she is seemingly rewarded by getting the chance to kill the hunter. But the story does not end with the death of the hunter. The hare then goes on her own killing

spree. She goes to the window of the hunter's home and finds his wife drinking coffee. She kills the wife. The hare proceeds to her own home and her own child, whom she shoots through the nose. She then turns the gun on herself. Perhaps she is punished after all.

The moment the hare kills her own child comes as a shock, one made more severe by the very rapidity and seeming triviality of the event. The tale preceding it is hardly innocent, but somehow still falls within the realm of our voyeuristic enjoyment. The audience cheers when the hare executes the hunter, and giggles when she offs his wife. A second later, though, she slaughters her offspring, and the audience can barely comprehend this disturbing event before the hare's own suicide. It is the very brutality of this moment that changes everything. We stop laughing, and begin to wonder whether we should have been amused in the first place. The story ends, the cast takes a bow – we applaud, but what are we clapping for? We smile, but also squirm. The show moves on, but we cannot so easily move past what we just saw. Why kill her child? And then immediately afterwards, kill herself? Is the baby hare just another victim of the production's inability to let children live? It seems far from insignificant that the coldblooded murder is followed by the hare's own suicide. It confirms what the rest of the production implies – that killing our children is equivalent to killing ourselves.

On an emotional level, *Shockheaded Peter* suggests that we are not removed from our childhood selves. The child is as inextricable from our adult self as the unconscious is from our conscious mind. It is impossible to 'cut the strings.' In part this understanding coheres with the way developmental psychology now theorizes childhood. Cognitive science argues that our childhood perspective lays the critical groundwork for how we think as adults. Rather than a period to repress, it is the foundation upon which we build any mature thought at all. Gopnick, Meltzoff and Kuhl argue that children are not so different from adults, and that this is precisely why Freud's account goes wrong: "Freud saw children as the apotheosis

of passion, creatures so driven by lusts and hungers that their most basic perceptions of the world were deeply distorted fantasies” (Gopnik et al 19). The authors argue that children are neither sacks of lust and desire, nor, as B.F. Skinner suggested, entirely blank slates. Instead they are more like “scientists,” born with certain tools that facilitate learning, and also capable of developing new tools to figure out the world. Their perspective then, is not one of distorted fantasy, but of an attempt to understand a foreign and chaotic world.

If this account of childhood seems too dry or clinical, that is a misunderstanding of what such rudimentary “science” would entail. Despite their book’s title, Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl do not envision children as little Einsteins, jotting down notes and abstractly meditating on their experiments with the world. They engage in their exploration via their bodies, and judge the success of their assessment of the world based on whether or not it gratifies their needs – and those needs are physical. Perhaps the most salient feature of this new conception of the infant mind is the idea of “an explanatory drive” (Gopnik et al 85), which they see as being as fundamental as hunger or lust.<sup>46</sup> While this account of childhood can do much to remove the sense of shame so fundamental to Freudian repression, it should not be interpreted as removing the danger. For children, creating sense out of the world is nothing less than a matter of life or death. If their assessment of the world is wrong, the resulting “prediction error” may actually place them in jeopardy. If they cannot properly gauge where the staircase begins, they may well fall down it. The cold fear of the uncanny

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<sup>46</sup> Freud saw a drive to explain or understand as a shunting over of some other sexual urge, as evidenced by his analysis of Leonardo da Vinci. In Hugh Haughton’s introduction to the *Uncanny*, he notes that Freud saw da Vinci’s “thirst for knowledge’... as a sublimation of his homoerotic sexual desire” (xxxiii). He goes on to note that the essay, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, “simultaneously normalizes Leonardo’s homosexuality and paradoxically pathologizes his quest for knowledge” (xxxiii).

may well have evolved as a warning that such a mistake is imminent. By disturbing our spatial perceptions, the production reproduces a state in which our very well being is at stake.

Reason cannot be separated from emotion, any more than mind can be divorced from body. In *Descartes' Error*, neurologist Antonio Damasio develops a thorough account of how our emotions play an essential role in all so called "rational" processes. And emotions are nothing less than a mental depiction of the state of the body. Individuals who through injury or disease lose access to some or all of their emotions also lose the ability to reason properly, to make decisions. The very sensation of self, Damasio argues, is grounded in our sense of our bodies, a process which begins as we interact with the world in childhood, but which does not by any means end there: "Early body signals, in both evolution and development, helped form a 'basic concept' of self; this basic concept provided the ground reference for whatever else happened to the organism, including the current body states that were incorporated *continuously* in the concept of self..." (Damasio 240). The sense of self established in childhood is corporeal in nature. At all times, this bodily awareness exists, whether or not it registers in our conscious thought. We retain it via our ongoing emotional landscape, which is why this awareness is also termed the "affective unconscious."

This childhood perspective is not abandoned (or repressed) in maturity. The parameters of childhood do continue to operate in our unconscious, as Freud suggested, but not through repression. Rather our constant engagement with the world at a pre-conscious, non-verbal level happens in this unconscious realm, via the patterns and systems established in childhood. The connection between puppets and the unconscious still holds, but rather than being metaphorical or symbolic, that connection is physical, navigated through our perceptions. The puppets of *Shockheaded Peter* address our affective consciousness, as our visceral response demonstrates. They bypass our conscious minds and speak directly to the



inner child in us. They stimulate expectations established during that period specifically for the purpose of contradicting them, thus recreating the “prediction errors” which register upon us as uncanny. The uncanny originates in our affective unconscious, and stimulates what we think of as consciousness itself.

One of the limitations of Freud’s theory of the uncanny is that children could not possibly experience it. So long as the uncanny is generated by the return of the repressed (or of childhood), we could not possibly sense it before we had experiences that had been repressed, childhoods which had been shunted into our dynamic unconscious. But recent science (and personal experience) demonstrate that not only children but even infants encounter the uncanny, in fact they do so often.<sup>47</sup> Understanding the unconscious as developmental and affective not only allows for the possibility that this experience occurs in childhood, it demonstrates that it necessarily does.

The uncanny forms a link between our adult and child selves. It is this bond that the production seems to honor. Over the course of the evening, the saga of shockheaded Peter continues. After shoving him below boards, Mommy and Daddy begin to change. They are drawn to the very child that initially so appalled them. They begin to even resemble him. Not very long after baby’s arrival, Mommy, in a fit of maternal guilt and longing, lays her body down on top of the floor where Peter is hidden, and seems to fall asleep. Around her sleeping form, Peter’s fingernails emerge, growing upwards like weeds, and then closing gently around

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<sup>47</sup> Prior to Freud, Ernst Jentsch took the uncanny in childhood experience as a given: “some stirrings of the feelings of psychical uncertainty arise with particular ease either when ignorance is very conspicuous or when the subjective perception of vacillation is abnormally strong. The first case can easily be observed in children: the child has had so little experience that simple things can be inexplicable for him and even slightly complicated situations can represent dark secrets... bright children are in fact generally quite the most fearful, since they are clearer about the boundaries of their own orientational abilities than more limited children are” (Jentsch 9).

her. The child embraces the mother. Bleach enters, again with his scissors in hand. He clips a few of those giant nails before the stage goes dark. The next time we see Mommy, she has developed her own massive fingernails and wild hair, as though these were contagious. Shortly thereafter, these features appear upon Daddy as well.

These uncanny events may be terrifying but the production suggests we also see them as productive. As Bleach declares in a central interlude: “Once, perhaps TWICE in a lifetime we may glimpse a sight so unexpected as to shake, shift and shatter our very philosophy of Life!” Such a sight is the definition of a prediction error, and prepares us for a moment of apprehension. With this declaration, Bleach introduces the audience to the “new” versions of Mommy and Daddy, who have become every bit as monstrous as their son was before. Childhood is a time when such errors are frequent, when we change dramatically as we are forming our understanding of the world. But even as adults we are capable of transformation. The uncanny results not only from the revelation of repression, but rather from anything and everything that shakes our foundation. And thus we grow. The uncanny is not just what’s under the stage. It is all around us.

### **Conclusion: Puppet Uprising**

Rather than being buried, the child’s perspective comes to dominate *Shockheaded Peter*. As the show reaches its climax, the iconic puppet-child pushes up the floorboards and reemerges. He has grown, oh my, how he has grown. He is a puffed up and swollen version of the baby that was delivered at the start of the evening. Mother and Father hesitate for a moment, and then embrace him. They claim him, echoing how they reacted to his initial arrival – “he has your eyes... he has your nails... he has OUR HAIR!” The family circle is complete.

This resurrection is reminiscent of that other child-puppet, Pinocchio. According to Harold Segel, this represents a “recurrent theme in the modernist interpretation of the puppet tradition, namely the revolt of the wooden figures against the puppeteer, a revolt of slaves against their master, a revolt against authority” (Segel 40). But the child-puppet of *Shockheaded Peter* does not revolt against adult authority. Instead, he claims them and owns them. They become him. If, as Segel suggests of Pinocchio, the transformation of puppet into boy illustrates the modern understanding of maturity, then Shockheaded Peter’s transformation of man into puppet might seem to be a dematurization – the reclamation of the adult mind by the child, and of the conscious mind by the unconscious. It is not the adults who will be consuming children tonight, but rather the other way around. But again, the performance complicates and deepens this surface symbolism.

*Shockheaded Peter* takes the matter one step further. The giant baby abruptly removes his hairy head/mask to directly address the audience. Inside the baby is none other than Julian Bleach. Our master of ceremonies, the “greatest actor in the world,” has literally been consumed by the puppet body. He wears it like a second skin – the costume’s nakedness is his own (the baby’s lower region is quite exposed, a fact which Bleach initially seems not to notice). The Peter suit is not quite a sufficient cover for his actual body’s exposure; it doesn’t quite close up in the back, revealing Bleach’s own costume underneath. When Bleach realizes he is undone behind, he tries awkwardly to close up the gap, as though the opening revealed true nakedness, rather than just his own clothes. Though it seems as though the child-puppet has won, the imperfections of this execution reveal that there is still more to be said.

The child-puppet Julian Bleach reaches the limit of his patience with the audience – he does not think we are getting it. In exasperation he declares, “There’s a meaning behind all this!” Perhaps, he prompts, we should all “ask what lies beneath our own floorboards.” The

implication that we are all repressing something seems to return us to the Freudian framework. But really, how seriously can we take the question, delivered as it is by a man dressed in a giant naked baby suit? The production does not simply advocate for repression or even revelation. The more subtle suggestion is reconciliation, an appreciation for the unknown and subconscious even as we work through our conscious minds. To know that everything we are, we are at all times, and IRRECONCILABLY SO – we are adults in child costumes, children wearing adult suits, playing dress-up and pretend. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of our nakedness in the mirror – and for a moment feel the cool breath of the uncanny. The appropriate response then, is not to hide, but to laugh, even as the chill creeps up our neck.

*Shockheaded Peter* does not end with the consumption of Julian Bleach – it has reserved one final gesture, one last triumph of uncanny spatiality. As the production draws to a close, a giant unruly Peter head appears above the stage through the aforementioned window, and two massive hands with man-sized fingernail extensions emerge through the doors on either side. Peter holds the entire stage in his morbid embrace. The theatre is literally incorporated into the puppet body. If this theatre is indeed the space of the mind, the bodily/affective consciousness becomes the container for it all. Peter's body extends around, above and behind the spectators, immersing us in his viscera.

This “junk opera” is to a certain extent packaged for easy consumption, and yet it sticks in the throat. It is not so easy to digest. Its message is ultimately parallel to the revelations of cognitive science, that our minds must accept their inextricable connection to our bodies (however flawed or imperfect these may be). And adults must acknowledge our childish, monstrous selves – that not only is their reality a part of us, more appropriately we are a part of it. The audience walks out of *Shockheaded Peter* smiling, laughing – our brains don't even fully appreciate the lesson our bodies take away. But we wake up in the night,

dreaming of Peter's nails poking up through the floorboards. The takeaway is not Bly, or Crouch or McDermott or Martyn Jacques or any of them – it's the baby they birthed. Peter is alive and well, and he's holding us all in his elongated talons.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Theatre through the Looking Glass – Theatrical Space in the Films of the Quay Brothers**

### **First Descent: The Museum**

As for the cellar, we shall no doubt find uses for it. It will be rationalized and its conveniences enumerated. But it is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths. (Bachelard 18)

In the winter of 2012, the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition of the work of the Quay Brothers. The retrospective, entitled *On Deciphering the Pharmacist's Prescription for Lip-Reading Puppets*, presented the extensive and varied output of the twin artists. On the second floor of the museum, patrons meandered through illustrations and book covers, inspirational vintage graphic posters, and screens showing film and commercial work. A few of their more recognizable and distinctive puppets also took up residence behind glass. The young girl from their music video *Are We Still Married* was there in her mildewy dress and soiled pink socks. In the film she was always shot from the shoulders down, with frequent close-ups of her feet rocking onto her toes or her bloomers peeking out underneath her skirt. The camera obsessively avoided looking up towards where her head would normally be. In her display case here she could be seen in her entirety, confirming suspicions that there was, in fact, nothing above her shoulders. Her rabbit companion occupied his own case near-by, mounted on some kind of spike, and deprived of the frenetic movement he sustained throughout the short film.

I navigated through the exhibition with increasing disappointment. The films of the Quay Brothers usually give me chills. In a dark room before their oneiric images, my skin crawls. I resist turning my eyes away from the film, not only because I am drawn to the

images, but also because they make me fear what I am not seeing. I am suddenly and inexplicably perturbed by darkness, not only on the screen, but also the shadowy world behind and around me. Their films have the power to bring darkness to life – to give the void prescience and to conjure a threatening presence from the abyss. They do not so much transport the viewer to another realm as transform the reality in which the viewer is already present. I lose my sense of space and am no longer certain of where the walls of the room are, or what lurks on the other side. When the film ends and the lights turn back on, I feel something sinister slipping away – I can almost catch its feathery breath on the back of my neck, hear the scratch of its nails behind the walls. During a viewing of one of their films, something comes to life that was not before. Whatever that presence may be, it was noticeably absent from the MOMA exhibition.

The combined sensations of exhilaration and fear that the Quays produce can only be termed uncanny. Suzanne Buchan, professor of animation aesthetics at the University for the Creative Arts and author of a comprehensive study on the Quay brothers,<sup>48</sup> calls their work “an animated architectural uncanny” (77). The term refers directly to Anthony Vidler’s book by the same name, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Vidler defines the uncanny as “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 11). He then goes on to explore the spatial qualities that have been “*emblematic* of the uncanny” for different historical moments (11). Buchan claims that in their films, the Quay brothers activate those qualities in motion. She lists other words that have been used to describe their work in the same vein, including, “macabre,” “nightmare,” “haunted,” and “phantom” (42). And yet, the MOMA exhibit offered curiously little of the uncanny quality so

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<sup>48</sup> *The Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom*.

profoundly felt in their work. I thought that seeing so much of their creative output in one place would intensify its atmosphere and effect, but instead the feeling was muted, stifled, stilled. Even in the adjoining screening rooms, where the films themselves were on continuous display, I was far too much at ease. What was sucking the potency from their art in its museum display? Perhaps it was the presence of other patrons. Shuffling feet and murmurs of appreciation or confusion were constant reminders of something all too human. Or perhaps it was too much of something else – of light, of sight, of space...

Before departing the exhibition, I learned that there was an annex that I had yet to visit. Several of the brothers' elaborate scenic designs for their films were also on display, but they were in a separate part of the museum, near the film center. These dioramas were being held in the basement, like naughty children, unsightly monsters, and repressed memories. Recalling the lessons of *Shockheaded Peter*, I smiled. *As they should be*, I thought... *below*. I slipped through a back corridor of the museum, and found the escalator going down. It was growing later in the day, and for whatever reason, no one else was visiting this part of the exhibition. I was alone with the glass cases. I felt like a wayward tourist, forgotten in the crypt after the cathedral has closed. Each case seemed to hold a sacred relic – the finger of a saint or flecks of skin and hair. Smells of must and mildew, faint wisps of decay.

Non-descript boxes were dispersed throughout the room, each with one of the Quays' elaborate designs inside. Three white walls and one of glass enclosed each mise-en-scene, or perhaps a better term would be mise-en-boîte. I approached one and encountered the tailor's shop from *Street of Crocodiles* – a dark and cloistered space, with heavy wooden shelves and inky recesses along the back wall, populated by a puppet tailor and his various assistants. The whole diorama was perhaps two and a half feet tall. I bent down to study its crevices and textures in detail. Around another corner, another universe in a box – this time, one of the



automatons from *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* – a face carved from wood, thorns and drops of sap-like blood oozing out from its pores. It returned my gaze. I felt the very emotion I had lost in the upper realms of the museum. I lingered in front of each miniature world, losing my sense of time. My imagination was contained, not just in the basement room, but also within each box, within each scene.

How much my experience was transformed by the simple fact of being below. In his phenomenological treatise, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard muses at length on the power that lower realms and regions have upon our imaginations. He aligns the experience of being below with the basements of our remembered childhood, and finds in these a dream space, a locus of potent irrationality. Victoria Nelson presents a similar claim in her 2001 book, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, a self-proclaimed redemption of the *mundus subterraneus*. Nelson traces an intellectual history in which the underground serves as the source of transcendental and metaphysical wisdom, dating back as early as pre-socratic thought.<sup>49</sup> She argues that enlightenment and modernization discouraged this appreciation of the below. Rejected from mainstream Western culture, the power of the underworld did not disappear. Our cultural denial of any metaphysical inclination did not eliminate its power – Nelson argues that these desires are far too “deeply embedded” within us (Nelson 6). Instead, these urges were transferred to the realm of pure imagination, particularly in the literature and art of popular culture. The more intensely our scientists and philosophers strove for a hyper-rationalization of the world, the more unconsciously our artists and authors were drawn to the supernatural

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<sup>49</sup> Pre-modern philosophy, she argues, demonstrated reverence for the underground, enclosed realm: “pre-Socratic Greek philosophy was rooted in a tradition of seeking wisdom in the darkness, not the light, via...caves” (Nelson 3).

and the fantastic.<sup>50</sup> Nelson even demonstrates that the generic term used for such supernatural fiction – the “grotesque” – has its origins in the “grotto,” or underground cave.

In these “grottos” and subterranean realms, fear combines with the sensation of awe, a feeling of access to some transcendental realm. This singular combination of fear and belief is the uncanny. My investigation of the uncanny and Nelson’s meditation on the grotesque therefore overlap. Nelson also addresses the uncanny, suggesting that it is like the grotesque – a latent connection to a spiritual impulse.<sup>51</sup> The terms uncanny and grotesque are sometimes used interchangeably in discussions of genre. But they are not identical, and many would classify certain works grotesque without being uncanny and vice versa. Nelson implies that studies of the “uncanny” place a greater focus on works of high-art, and prefers the term “grotesque” for its more immediate access to the realm of popular entertainment. But whether or not it has certain critical associations, the uncanny can be found in both high and low art. To the extent that it can be separated from the grotesque, the uncanny is distinguished by perspective more than aesthetic status. The terms are generated by different criteria. By calling her subject matter “the grotesque,” Nelson defines her realm by its intellectual legacy. In terming mine the “uncanny” I am highlighting the manner of its reception, and focusing on the visceral and unsettling response which it generates. As a category, the uncanny is therefore both more flexible and more suggestive. It is often a marker of the grotesque, found in the emotional response which these works can inspire: “the feeling aroused by stories of the supernatural grotesque is finally all that we superstition-free rationalists possess of the

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<sup>50</sup> “... after the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century... the *mundus subterraneus* could no longer be accepted as a physical location and was transformed through a series of interesting steps into a fictive transcendental-psychological locus in literature and film” (Nelson 6).

<sup>51</sup> Though Freud found a way to secularize even this impulse through his concept of psychological repression.

numinous” (Nelson 18).<sup>52</sup> That inescapable sensation of possibility – the doubting of doubt, the belief-that-maybe – is the uncanny effect. It can be experienced without a specifically grotesque inspiration. But the fact that this result is often linked to the grotesque confirms the potency of Nelson’s philosophical and aesthetic category. To the extent that Nelson considers the *atmosphere* of the grotto, i.e. the phenomenological experience of that space, her work speaks directly to questions of reception.

The Quays are entirely aware of the importance of descending in order to access another realm. To complement their exhibit this past winter, the MOMA produced a corresponding book of images and criticism, including a self-reflection by the Quays (an activity which, for twins, necessarily has compound significance). They present their thoughts via an imaginary conversation between themselves and Heinrich Holzmüller, an obscure historical “schriebmeister,” whom they literarily resurrect to expound on calligraphy, puppets and the transmutation of life into ink and back again. They consider the sixteenth century master of penmanship a particularly kindred spirit. In the discussion, he becomes yet another one of the Quay brothers’ puppets – dead, and yet not dead, beyond the control of his puppeteers and yet also a prescient echo of their own thoughts before they can voice them.

The Quays in conversation are themselves an unsettling phenomenon. Their individual identities are inscrutable; one brother begins a sentence and the other finishes it. They seem to

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<sup>52</sup> The very physicality of our response can be considered proof of Nelson’s claim. The beliefs that the grotto represents must still be active in us at some unconscious level to act so thoroughly upon our autonomic nervous system. Where Freud and others suggest that the “awareness” of an artwork being fiction allows us to experience fear and the uncanny “safely,” Nelson turns this argument on its head, suggesting rather that our need for the uncanny and for fear precedes our fictions. “Consuming art forms of the fantastic is only one way that we as nonbelievers allow ourselves, unconsciously, to believe” (Nelson vii). Secular culture rejected our need to believe, but popular fictions were invented to respect those beliefs. We are not able to feel fear because it is fiction; rather, we pretend that it is fiction, because we already feel the fear. The films may be fiction – the emotions and beliefs that they suggest, however, are very much real.

enjoy maintaining this shared dual existence, offering a completely allied aesthetic and perspective. They even share a single signature.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps they felt the need to add a third voice to the conversation precisely because their own minds are too symbiotically entwined to have a productive discussion. A Holzmüller animated by the Quays' own breath, however, becomes himself yet another dopplegänger. He becomes a reflection of their reflection. Even in their written work, they are fond of repetitions and mirrors.

In this admittedly solipsistic discussion, the brothers discuss the importance of descent to achieve the “otherworldly” quality of their work:

QQs: Analogously it does make us think of the Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode, who wrote for puppets and said that to enter a “cave” – where the marionette performances took place - it was important and necessary ‘to stoop’ down... to lower oneself to the scale of the puppets and their universe.

HH: And that is indeed a genuine invitation to humility.

QQs: Because they pull you down to their realm and once you adjust to their horizon, then that seems to become the great measure for their ‘condition of enchantment.’ (Delson 23)

For the Quays, the act of “lowering oneself” is both a physical and spiritual journey. It is about descent, but also about humility – about attaining the status of something small and insignificant. It is a matter of scale. The Quays are attracted to puppets because their diminutive size requires, predicates even, an act of lowering by the spectator. This is the allure of the miniature.

While they are not the same, the cave and the miniature are frequently linked. The miniature realm is most often thought of as being below us – both below our feet, and often, below our notice. It is the world of insects and seeds, of dolls and toys, of children and secrets. It is precisely the level at which the Quays are most at home. They construct their puppet realms from the forgotten detritus under our couches – cotton balls and rubber bands and

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<sup>53</sup> If you receive an autograph from one of them, the other will refuse to sign again, asserting, “You already have my signature.”

paper clips and screws. As Suzanne Buchan notes, “In their use of lighting, lenses, and camera, the Quays pay infinitely precise attention to the simplest things – a screw, a dandelion clock, a mottled piece of glass – which are transformed into a poetic epiphany” (67). As with the underground, the ‘little’ offers and requires a different way of knowing the world. We must alter our focus in order to conceive of life at such a scale.

The miniature is also a realm of closure, like the caves and grotto that Nelson describes. It is a universe contained in a nutshell, or a novel written on the head of a pin. In order to conceive of the very small, it must be in reference to something else, which determines its size.<sup>54</sup> Susan Stewart has written extensively about the experience of the miniature. She notes that, “in the miniature we see spatial closure posited over temporal closure. The miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time” (Stewart 48). Containment creates concentration. Like a specimen underneath the microscope, its minutiae are only revealed within the rounded perspective of the microscope’s lens. As Bachelard writes, “Attention by itself is an enlarging glass” (Bachelard 158). By restraining our focus to something very small, we actually open up a new immensity: “The miniature deploys to the dimensions of the universe” (Bachelard 157). Phenomenologically, focus is a two way street – containment creates attention, but attention also creates containment.

Bachelard and Stewart’s observations clarify why the lower level exhibit at the MOMA was so potent. The Quays’ designs were doubly contained – both within the glass museum cases, and also within themselves as miniature worlds. The tailor’s shop is itself a hermetic black box. Every other diorama was likewise an independent and separate world. I

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<sup>54</sup> “The depiction of the miniature works by establishing a referential field, a field where signs are displayed in relation to one another and in relation to concrete objects in the sensual world” (Stewart 45).

choose this word – diorama – consciously for its specifically theatrical connotations. As noted by Richard Allen in the 2013 issue of *Performance Research*, *On Scenography*: the word diorama “originated in the nineteenth century to describe a type of picture-viewing device or mobile mini-theatre” (120). These containers are theatrical spaces in a deeply significant way. It is in the essence of theatre to contain, as Arnold Aronson observed in the same issue: “In the *Physics*, Aristotle posited the notion of space as a sort of container that is distinct from its contents. We can think of the physical theatre – the place where performance occurs – as an Aristotelian container” (Aronson 85). The Quays’ miniature containers have a powerful theatricality.

The very nature of the miniature entails a certain amount of drama. Susan Stewart reveals what she calls “the essential *theatricality* of all miniatures.” She suggests:

Our transcendent viewpoint makes us perceive the miniature as object and this has a double effect. First, the object in its perfect stasis nevertheless suggests use, implementation, and contextualization. And second, the representative quality of the miniature makes that contextualization an allusive one; the miniature becomes a stage on which we project, by means of association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of *actions*. (Stewart 54)

In seeing *theatre* in the miniature, Stewart identifies the importation of “actions” and “events” into the miniature world. But if a miniature shares qualities with a theatre, a theatre must in turn provide aspects of a miniature, and it does. Like the miniature, a theatre creates focus. The containment of the theatre, so like one of Nelson’s grottoes, allows us to narrow our attention upon the stage.

Suzanne Buchan takes this idea one step further, with the implication that the Quays’ scenic designs can actually “perform,” even in exhibition: “What fascinates is not simply the detail and the miniature scale; the *performance* of these sets in the cases also pulls the observer in” (Buchan 99). They seduce our imagination, and we envision whole dramas upon these

minute stages. The Quays by no means intend these sets to stand in for the films themselves, but the scenic installations do serve an important purpose – “they are a reminder of the static imitation of the film’s otherwise natural evanescent flux” (the Quays, quoted by Buchan 99). The dioramas on display are themselves a kind of detritus of a cinematic life – the enduring remainder, where the memory of film lingers like so much dust.

It is not surprising then, that I found the lower portion of the exhibition so atmospherically uncanny. There I enacted the phenomenological conditions described by Bachelard, Stewart and Nelson above.<sup>55</sup> I descended to a subterranean level to muse upon enclosed miniature spaces. What makes my museum experience so intelligible, however, makes the film work itself somewhat less so. The viewer of one of these films does not take such a journey. He or she exists in a very different relationship to the elements of the mise-en-scene. When presented as part of the film, the elements of the mise-en-scene may not appear tiny in relation to the viewer – their dimensions will be in proportion to the screen on which they surface. That might be the minimal space of a computer screen, or it may be the epic scale of a movie theatre. Enclosure and miniature are essential aspects of the Quays’ uncanny impact. But how do they achieve these experiences in a medium like film, which is inherently elastic in its spatiality? To answer this question, we must descend again.

## **Second Descent: The Film in the Theatre**

My father never tired of glorifying this extraordinary element – matter. ‘There is no dead matter,’ he taught us, ‘lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life.’ (Schulz 31)

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<sup>55</sup> “We always *go down* the one that leads to the cellar, and it is this going down that we remember, that characterizes its oneirism” (Bachelard 25).

The Quay Brothers' most famous film is *Street of Crocodiles*, a twenty minute short based loosely on Bruno Schulz's novel of the same name. The film does not follow the plot – to the extent that the novel has one – rather, it is a kind of love song to Schulz's unique descriptive language, which transforms the every day and the mundane into spiritual epiphanies. In the novel, the protagonist's father spends two chapters expounding a metaphysical treatise on matter, in which he asserts that all things are alive – that the inanimate is animate in ways we cannot understand but should learn to celebrate. His audience pokes fun at him, and yet on some level they seem to believe his lectures, or at least to feel profoundly unsettled by them.

This credo on the life of objects could as easily be a description of Schulz's own writing. His descriptions of the world give agency and will to the inanimate, and reduce the animate to something mechanical, as this excerpt demonstrates:

Adela's outstretched slipper trembled slightly and shone like a serpent's tongue. My father rose slowly, still looking down, took a step forward like an automaton, and fell to his knees. The lamp hissed in the silence of the room, eloquent looks ran up and down in the thicket of wallpaper patterns, whispers of venomous tongues floated in the air, zigzags of thought... (Schulz 34)

The shoe of the family's maid has more vibrancy in this passage than the father. He becomes the "automaton," incapable of governing his own movements. The spirit of the serpentine shoe seems to possess the entire room – even the lamp and the wallpaper patterns join in. Schulz's narrator describes this moment "as an instance of the malice of inanimate objects transferred into the region of psychology" (34), revealing that he himself agrees with the father to an extent. He does not doubt that inanimate objects can have intention – and dark ones at that. Schulz sustains a deeply uncanny effect throughout this mesmerizing and uncomfortable passage, which forms the very heart of his novel. Through his metaphors (which indeed, the reader suspects are not really metaphors but rather intended literally), he gives us access to the inner life of "dead" matter.



This philosophy is the source of the Quays' attraction to Schulz. They animate inanimate objects in their films in much the same way as Schulz's writing – perhaps taking his ideas even further than he does. They grant autonomy to items as insignificant as screws and rubber bands, but restrict the agency of humans. When working with live actors, they often limit their performances to specific and stylized gestures, and hyper-controlled expressions. They exert considerable effort to make humans resemble puppets, while only being slightly concerned that the opposite be true. The Quay Brothers and Bruno Schulz share a metaphysical perspective that celebrates the life of objects, which explains why the author's work adapted so effectively into the artists' hands.

Like the book, the film version of *Street of Crocodiles* exerts a powerfully uncanny effect. It makes extensive use of the phenomenological elements described in the first section – descent, enclosure, and diminutive scale. By describing this film in detail, I will suggest how the Quays create these sensations in cinematic form. Furthermore, exploring their techniques in this example will provoke questions regarding film itself as a medium of space and time, and reveal how the Quays manipulate that medium by virtue of their understanding of theatre.

*Street of Crocodiles* also begins with a descent, one which takes place within the diegesis of the film. A man enters a deserted and dilapidated hall of the sort suited to small community performances. The atmosphere, along with this man's appearance, suggests Eastern Europe. He moves about the space performing seemingly custodial tasks with lighting instruments while the film's titles are overlaid in blue font. He ascends stairs to an elevated stage where several "viewing machines" are on display. The one at center stage looks distinctly familiar. In their original treatment for the films, the Quays described it as "similar to Edison's Kinetoscope" (PM). It is a narrow wooden box, tall but low enough that one has to bend over

slightly to see through the eyepiece on top. Attached to the front of the machine is a beautiful old map of a non-descript city. A small magnifying instrument is focused on one neighborhood in particular.

As the camera frames this apparatus, a title appears over it, announcing “Prelude: The Wooden Esophagus.” Already with this title, the Quays merge the animate and the inanimate. The esophagus is a body part – in particular a part most intimate and interior, known only through visceral sensation. And yet this esophagus is not made of flesh, but rather wood, with an anatomy of metal gears and thread. We access it not through the autonomic nervous system, but rather by sight – looking down through the lenses of the eyepiece. The wooden esophagus combines objects and viscera, mixing the most intimate knowledge with the most remote.

The “body” of the film, the content which follows this overture, begins with the act of looking through the esophagus. The old man peers through the eyepiece into the depths of the machine itself. The film cuts to a moving (descending) shot of the machine’s interior, which comes to rest on a mechanism of some kind, made of dirty and bloodstained razor blades. The camera pans back up, and we then cut back to the man who now adjusts the magnifying lens to study the map. He shifts his attention back to the machine, and spits into it. We cut again to the interior, where we witness the gob of spit dropping down on to the razor blades, which immediately begin to turn. The inner workings of the machine are set into motion by his bodily fluid. The rotating razor blades activate gears and spools. These in turn are attached to trails of thread which snake their way throughout the machine. The camera follows these threads as they wind lower and lower, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the machine. When we arrive below, one end of a thread is wound around the wrist of a puppet figure. He has been sleeping or otherwise inert, his hand suspended over his head by the thread, his pale

white fingers trapped in the casement of a street lamp. Along with the machine, he seems to have been woken by the old man's spittle, and now his hand flutters against the glass panes like a trapped bird. He pulls down on his hand, and notices the thread that limits his movements. The film cuts back to the exterior of the "wooden esophagus" where the handle of a pair of scissors emerges from the box. The old man's hand reaches forwards and takes the scissors. He pushes them into the machine. We cut back into the interior, where the blades of the scissors intrude into the scene, and cut the thread. The puppet is free, and begins to wander through the labyrinthine realms inside this machine.<sup>56</sup>

This disorienting prelude actually orients our perspective in critical ways. The region that the puppet now begins to explore is firmly established as interior, below, and small. Within the framework of these parameters, the Quays use space intentionally to confuse and destabilize the viewer.<sup>57</sup> But through all the film's twists and turns, the established primary conditions are essential to creating and maintaining the desired atmospheric impact. The "interior" aspect is clear – we are inside the esophagus viewing machine – but within that interior are even more enclosures, a labyrinth of interwoven spaces that our brains cannot map. We are undoubtedly below, yes, but below what? The puppet, once freed, looks up to discover a kind of industrial skylight. All that can be seen through the panes of glass is murky white light. Then a shadowy figure runs along one edge of the frame. The puppet is drawn ineluctably towards the figure, and this pursuit leads further and further into the underworld.

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<sup>56</sup> The liberation of this puppet contrasts directly with the consequence of cutting the strings in *Shockheaded Peter*. Unlike puppet theatre, cutting the strings of a puppet in a film does not have to bring about that puppet's demise – one of many ways that film puppetry differs from the stage.

<sup>57</sup> "[*Street of Crocodiles*] was the first time that we'd really attempted something on that scale and tried to use space in a way to deliberately confuse..." (Quay brothers, quoted in Buchan 81).

Though the figure (who turns out to be a young boy, the narrator of Schulz's novel) initially appears above, there is no way for the explorer to ascend. In order to follow him, he must go deeper in, rather than up.

The scale of the world is also uncertain. The puppet wanders through streets and alleys in a mercantile district. He looks through dirty windowpanes and around dark corners. Various objects are displayed behind the glass cases, either to be viewed or perhaps purchased. Like everything within a Schulzian or Quayesque world, these objects intermingle the inanimate with the animate. A wind-up monkey flaps his arms together spasmodically. The interior of a pocket watch is exposed, and instead of gears, the watch's innards are flesh. Some of the objects the puppet encounters correspond to him in scale – tiny boxes, street signs, railings and stairs. Others, however, do not. The pocket watch is about half the height of our puppet guide. The world is held together by screws the size of his hand. The combination of different scales however, does not cause cognitive dissonance. Rather it seems to confirm a kind of integrity or authenticity to this miniature landscape. If these screws are real, then the puppets who walk amongst them are convincingly real as well. The combination of disparate scales also confirms this world's miniature size, no matter what screen the images are projected upon. We have an internal and visceral knowledge of the size and scale of our humble everyday objects. These provide the parameters by which we can measure the unknown content of this realm.

Our ability to recognize the world as miniature might seem to distance the audience from the world being viewed. How can there be any sort of identification with a protagonist who operates at such a different level, whose vital energy seems disconnected from any humanity? But the Quays do intend the viewer to become immersed in their films – absorbed into an uncanny and claustrophobic experience. The mechanism of our absorption is not

necessarily identification, however – the spectator does not have to project him or herself onto a specific character in order to be consumed. What sucks the viewer into the film is the very act of viewing.

The puppet whose path we pursue, whom the Quay brothers refer to as their Schulz puppet, is not intended to be the protagonist of *Street of Crocodiles* – or indeed, any character from Schulz’s novel. By connecting him more to the author than any individual of the book, the Quays also connect the puppet to us – outsiders who do not belong within the novel (or this neighborhood), but who are still drawn into its realm. We do not connect with the puppet as a character, but rather, as a fellow voyeur. And the Quay brothers reveal that spectating is not a safe practice. In the original treatment for *Street of Crocodiles*, the puppet was intended to resemble the initial spectator of the wooden esophagus – the old man. By activating the viewing machine, he would become literally incorporated into it. Though in the current film, the resemblance between this puppet and the original spectator is slight, they remain connected through the act of seeing. While exploring, the Schulz puppet peers through various windowpanes and around dark corners. He discovers one peephole in particular, which resembles the eyepiece of the viewing machine itself. When he looks inside, he sees an internal world of flexible time. Ice cubes melt and refreeze, and dandelion seeds decay and are restored to vitality. But he also sees something else, something more disturbing. He sees himself imprisoned within myriad panes of glass (as his hand was at the start of the film). This vision is further enclosed by the Quays’ choice of lens at this moment, which blurs the edges of the frame and gives the sensation of being contained within the sphere of a fishbowl, or a marble, or perhaps an eye. The puppet performs the same voyeuristic act as the old man, implying that the result is also the same. If the puppet looks inwards and sees himself, then what the old man sees in the viewing machine, our Schulz puppet, is himself as well.

The implications of this pattern are unsettling. Looking into this world imprisons one within it. In any film, the act of spectating will always be somewhat referential to the film viewer. If the spectator of the viewing machine can become trapped inside the viewing machine, then the spectator of the film is likewise inserted into the film. The wooden esophagus demonstrates the way in which this two-dimensional film becomes not just a three-dimensional experience for the filmgoer, but actually a 360-degree immersion.

Throughout the film, there is a tension between the two and the three-dimensional, between the world that is experienced only through sight, and the one that surrounds us, which we know viscerally. What makes this relationship particularly intriguing is that it plays out in a medium that is itself entirely two-dimensional. Upon a flat screen, the Quays achieve sensations of depth, closure, and a specific kind of scale. These spatial parameters are designed to provoke feelings of unease alongside wonder: an uncanny dimensionality. In order to create these effects, the Quays make use of a different art form, or rather a particular understanding of a different art form – the theatre. The Quays are familiar with both mediums, and so it is not surprising that they would use the techniques of one to enhance the impact of the other. But the relationship between film and theatre within the *Street of Crocodiles* film is not complementary. They unsettle and destabilize each other, struggling for primacy even as they fold into each other and become increasingly interdependent.

The film makes constant reference to itself as film, from the esophagus-kinetoscope at the start. In the original conception of the film, the thread that winds through the labyrinthine realm was actually a filmstrip.<sup>58</sup> The choice to use thread instead was certainly motivated in part by the importance of the tailor and the tailor's shop in the novel. Iconic elements like the

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<sup>58</sup> From the original treatment: "The inside of the mechanism reveals an assortment of wheels, gears and cogs over which passes a continuous loop of film..." (PM).

thread and scissors act like a trail of breadcrumbs, ultimately leading us to the tailor's shop (an erotic version of the witch's gingerbread house, perhaps). The thread is also a personal touch for the Quays, for whom thread is an important tool of their craft. They use it to control puppets and objects from one frame of their animation to the next.<sup>59</sup> If the viewer is linked to the Schulz puppet, the Quays are the tailor, drawing us further and further into their filmic realm. The thread does not just wind around the space, it penetrates it, navigating through walls and behind glass. Their thread seduces, it lures the Schulz puppet deeper and deeper into the space.

Though not literally a filmstrip, the thread does act as a metaphor for film, or perhaps more specifically for film's temporal progression. Throughout the film, time proceeds in a non-linear fashion, which permits ice cubes to reform as easily as they melt, and allows dandelions to unwilt. The thread that untangles at the touch of the Schulz puppet at the beginning twines back into a knot at the end. As Suzanne Buchan has noted, this temporal reflection which frames the film provides a "closure of sorts, tying up time's flow as the film's color bleaches to a mythopoetic monochrome" (Buchan 77). Through the thread, the temporal flow of the film is translated into a single spatial dimension. Time in the film has a freedom that contrasts with the spatial confinement. It operates in both directions, slows, even holds its breath. Film is an art of time. The thread that articulates that temporal momentum becomes a manifestation of the filmic medium itself.

If the thread is film, then the claustrophobic space of the *Street of Crocodiles* is the theatre. After he awakes and begins his journey, the Schulz puppet arrives before the entrance

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<sup>59</sup> In their commentary to this film, one of the brothers notes how you can see the threads in one of the shots (where the screws fall all around the young boy puppet). He remarks that it surprises him now how 'crude' they were then, that they were just using regular thread, rather than invisible thread, but there is a certain nostalgia in his voice for their early methods (PM).

to this commoditized district. The neighborhood is set behind another pane of dirty glass, atop a wide set of low stairs, and framed by a proscenium – clearly implying a theatre stage. If there were any doubt of this significance, a prompt box is located just at the front at the base of the stairs. This is where our explorer finds the tangled thread whose knot is both the beginning and end of time within this realm. Releasing that knot raises the pane of glass (like a theatrical curtain) and allows the puppet entry into a constantly shifting spatial realm. For the Quays, these internal spaces are also theatrical: “the man is drawn almost against his will to wander a labyrinth of ceaselessly transforming theatrical spaces. It as is though the interior of the city takes him in its undertow to navigate the anatomy of the streets and the verbal signs of this ‘zoned-off’ quarter.”<sup>60</sup>

These interwoven insular spaces are presented as theatrical in multiple ways. First – they are realms of performance, each shop displaying its wares as a kind of voyeuristic show. Secondly they are designed like scenery – or perhaps more accurately like the models designers make for scenery. Something about these dioramas when filmed produces a cave-like sensation. Ron Magliozzi observes this effect in his article in the MOMA booklet, “Manic Department Store.” He discusses “the themes of ‘interior and exterior space’ and ‘closure and exploration’ in the Quay’s films” and suggests, “What on paper resemble static stage settings on film become claustrophobic interiors, where inscrutable dramas play out...” (14). Not only does an enclosed space suggest a theatre, but a stage setting produces a claustrophobic response when filmed in a certain way. Perhaps the reason is that these theatrical settings are enclosed on three sides – when filmed, the screen becomes the absent and otherwise imagined fourth wall, closing in the action like a case in a museum.

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<sup>60</sup> From the Quay Brothers’ original treatment for the film, found in the bonus features of *Phantom Museums*.



There is, of course, an actual theatre in the film – the one in which the prelude takes place. The theatre was not the location originally intended for this opening. In their treatment for the film, this scene occurred in “a dilapidated and deserted provincial amusement parlor” (Phantom Museums). When they actually began filming, however, they chose this space, and so the entire film, including even the esophagus itself, is contained within a theatre. Theatres are, appropriately enough, containers for both the spectated and the spectator. This particular theatre, however, is simultaneously container and contained. It holds within it the entirety of the film’s diegesis. But the theatre is part of the filmic diegesis as well, and so is contained within the film. The paradigm establishes a kind of recursive intra-medial hall of mirrors. Films and theatres constantly reflect and contain each other, each medium unseating the other. Within these shifting images, the Quays manipulate time and space to confuse and unsettle. However, one thing remains firmly trapped – the viewer.

The Quay brothers’ use of the language and experience of theatre to create their uncanny films begs us to reconsider how we perceive both film and theatre, and their interaction. From its conception, film has been noted for its uncanny properties. Much has been written about this quality in film, and very little work has been done on the corresponding effect in theatrical practice. *ParaDoxa* dedicated the 1997 issue to the genre of the uncanny in a broad range of media and social context. Of the 19 articles included, at least three considered the uncanny nature of film. Two looked at the experience in television. The only article to even consider the phenomenon of the uncanny in theatrical practice did so only in order to demonstrate how that practice evolved into a more appropriate medium – film.

That article, “Uncanny Theater” by William Paul, is actually a discussion of the emergence of film as an art form. He presents the development of cinema as a natural consequence of the evolution of the uncanny aesthetic. He places movies “in the context of

magic lantern shows of earlier decades...” and suggests that film satisfied many of the same impulses that drew audiences to these shows.<sup>61</sup> Paul makes a distinction between magic lantern shows and legitimate theatre, and acknowledges that film emerged from both traditions. He argues that while the “magic lantern” shows were spectacles in fantasy, the theatrical tradition at the time trended increasingly towards realism: “If theater in the three decades leading up to the introduction of the feature film gravitated more and more towards a material realism, a realism of object and environment, then film could seem as much a culminating development in the history of the theater as it was in the history of the magic lantern show” (327). Paul notes that this dual heritage created a tension in early film between two aesthetic aims – the “natural” and the “supernatural” (328). That tension made film more than just a spectacle. Its blend of the supernatural with the natural was uncanny. Paul’s evolutionary approach implies that film was a superior conduit for the uncanny experience than live performance. He goes so far as to claim that movies ARE “uncanny theater” (Paul 346).

Paul is hardly the first to declare cinema fundamentally uncanny. Tom Gunning argues for early cinema as a cinema of “astonishment,” one which exerted an “uncanny and agitating power” on its audiences (Gunning 116). He claims that the main appeal of early cinema was its marvelousness, the power of this new technology to “sweep away a prior and firmly entrenched sense of reality” (Gunning 122). Early cinema was a visceral experience for the viewer, it provided a “vertiginous experience of the frailty of our knowledge of the world before the power of visual illusion” (Gunning 122). It inspired fear, awe, but also a thrill, a

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<sup>61</sup> “Even before the movies, movement as a source of astonishment was a common element in magic lantern shows since they could create a simulation of movement in the image by bodily moving the lantern or manipulating two slides in relation to each other.” Paul argues that this confirms the role of early cinema as Tom Gunning’s “cinema of astonishment” (Paul 323).

rush of adrenaline. Cinema's potential to re-present the past also provides an uncanny sense of resurrection, as noted by Robert Smith, "Early viewers of film were amazed and moved by this miraculous gift dispensed by film, that of reanimating what had gone... Like Christ calling Lazarus, film seemed to bring back to life what had been irrevocably lost; it blurred uncannily the distinction between life and death" (121).<sup>62</sup> What makes Paul's contribution to the uncanny conception of film valuable for this study is his exploration of that uncanniness in relationship to theatre and theatrical space in particular.

Paul asserts that while both live performance shows and film could achieve an uncanny experience, each had a distinct brand of magic. Magic lantern shows and their like used trickery and manipulation, where-as the magic of film was inherent: "...magic lantern shows involved a deliberate manipulation of the environment to fool the senses.... As a descendent of the magic lantern, movies could also produce such illusions."<sup>63</sup> He continues, "There is something magical about movement in movies because we cannot fully explain it, but it is a peculiar kind of magic, not at all the result of sleight-of-hand. Rather, it is magic mysteriously created by and within our minds. It is a kind of *natural* magic" (Paul 326). It is this "naturalness" that causes Paul to suggest that film is inherently more uncanny than theatre. He elaborates on this position by further comparing the uncanny effect the stage is capable of producing with the uncanny effect that film achieves:

In a sense, the uncanniness of the stage illusion is tamed by the fact that it requires our complicity: we are co-creators of the illusion. In film, on the contrary, the illusion remains disturbingly uncanny because it happens both within us as a consequence of

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<sup>62</sup> Also quoted in Nicholas Royle's somewhat stream-of-consciousness meditation on uncanny film (see Royle 75-83).

<sup>63</sup> He offers a specific example, "Pepper's Ghost" in which the obfuscation of the screen gave "the impression of projected actors moving about the real space of the stage." However "the movies themselves don't *require* the sleight-of-hand of the magic lantern show to achieve their illusion" (Paul 324).

our neurological make-up, yet seemingly independent of us since we cannot deconstruct the illusion. (Paul 330)

He almost goes so far as to suggest that film made the practices of uncanny performance on the stage obsolete. If not wholly extinct, they were at least significantly endangered by the new medium.

In making this claim, Paul delves into the spatial component of the cinematic experience. In specific, he discusses how early cinematic presentation struggled with how to mark off the space of the film image. The audience had no expectations or parameters for reception. First generation film producers had to make choices as to whether to enclose the image in a frame, or how far away to position the screen.<sup>64</sup> He notes that many early films were shown in “legitimate” theatres, where the film was literally on stage (Paul 332). Paul describes several exhibition venues in which the screen took up residence within a setting of theatrical scenery – a parlor with a large window (which would be transformed into the screen), or a formal garden. These settings, Paul notes, created a kind of “organic unity” between theatrical setting and film image (Paul 339). Despite that apparent cohesion, Paul suggests these scenographic depictions were as much an enclosure for the cinematic image as the theatrical venues themselves: “I would claim that the attempts to move film into the higher precincts of the legitimate theater carried with it a certain repression. The stage settings so common in this period effectively served not as a frame, but rather as a container for the film image” (Paul 340).

Paul suggests that the theatrical settings placed limits on film’s expressive potential. He connects the act of containment with the act of repression. But containment and repression

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<sup>64</sup> “Nowadays we tend to see the screen image as set off from our space by a sea of black cloth that leaves it spectrally suspended in mid-air. But in the teens and twenties, at least, the film image was more of a permeable thing” (Paul 339).

are both potential sources of the uncanny experience, containment begin even more powerful than repression in this regard. One might even ask if there can be any uncanny experience without a container of some kind. Early film producers felt that these frames were necessary to provide viewers with some kind of entry, a bridge, to the uncanny space of the film. Even without a scenic setting, some space, some liminal realm, was an essential component of the experience: "Since the movie screen was always placed upstage in theaters of this period, the movement from stage action to film image generally involved a kind of moving in, as if the audience were being invited to move from a world it recognizes to an unfamiliar, uncanny world" (Paul 342). Paul goes even further, suggesting that in these border spaces, early film demonstrated awareness of its own uncanny effect:

... Placing the screen behind the curtain also signaled a different way of experiencing the film image, since it now began in almost disembodied state located more in our space, before it settled into its rightful space on the screen.

Presenting the film image on the curtain at the beginning and end of the show was a way of temporarily granting the image its uncanny due... This sense of movement into and away from the film that first acknowledges, then contains the uncanny aspects of the image.... (Paul 344)

The use of frames, curtains, and other sorts of borders called attention to film's uncanny power, enhancing its effect through containment.

Despite his claim that film is itself *uncanny* theatre, Paul's own extensive discussion of the effect of a specific space of presentation suggests that this claim must be complicated and nuanced. It seems that film achieves a large part of its uncanny effect by virtue of its being experienced in and through space (and importantly, not just the space of the film itself). What Paul's analysis does demonstrate is that there is something about the interaction of the filmic

with the theatrical that is unsettling and unsafe.<sup>65</sup> It is this particular interaction that the Quays exploit by directly engaging theatrical space in *Street of Crocodiles*.

I recognize that there is a large difference between the Quays' narrative/visual containment of their film within the theatre and the literal containment that William Paul describes. The films of the Quay Brothers are, without a doubt, films, even when they portray a theatre. But they are also more than that – they infiltrate and manipulate the space outside the screen as well as within it, and challenge our preconceptions of what film is. In so doing, they restore the uncanny impact that films had in their early cinematic presentations. The particular genius of the Quays is their ability to use the *mise-en-scene* of their films to effectively create a theatrical container in the viewer's own mind. They imprison their audience in an uncanny and claustrophobic space for the duration of the film, and often after as well.

### **Third Descent: the Theatre in the Film**

These things never happen but are always.

(Sallust; epigraph from *The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes*)

The Quays are attracted to the power of the theatrical container. Sometimes the appeal of theatre is more overt, sometimes it manifests more implicitly in the hermetic nature of their films. In almost every film that the Quay brothers have made, they explore what Suzanne Buchan calls “metaphysical interiors.” The sense of a confined interior is not only a feature of their stop motion and puppet films. David Sorfa suggests that in adapting the novel *Jakob von*

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<sup>65</sup> Even in the example cited above of “Pepper’s Ghost”, the singularly uncanny effect is achieved through an unclear melding of film and theatre.

*Gunten* into the feature film *Institute Benjamenta*, the Quays made it more “claustrophobic.”<sup>66</sup> Their penchant for sealing off the space of their films leads them repeatedly to the theatre both as a metaphor and as an actual location – a trajectory that culminates in their 2005 film, *The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes*. In this film, the theatrical medium pervades both the narrative and the technique.

*The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes* sits at the opposite end of the Quay brothers’ oeuvre from their *Street of Crocodiles*. The former was made almost twenty years after the latter. One is almost entirely stop-motion animation, and the other is mostly live action. One is a short film produced when the Quays were obscure and unknown. The other is a feature length film by the acclaimed and recognizable twin filmmakers. *Street of Crocodiles* is a film the twins still speak about with great pride. *The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes*, they claim, is a disappointment – though their dissatisfaction seems to be entirely centered on the performance of one actress.<sup>67</sup> Despite this disparity, the latter film revisits and expands upon many of the ideas the Quays began exploring in the former.

Like *Street of Crocodiles*, *The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes* begins with a kind of prelude, also involving a theatre. This one is not abandoned however – we encounter it on the occasion of a private performance. The opera singer Malvina van Stille and her fiancé, conductor Adolfo Blin, give a recital on the night before their wedding. The walls of the intimate theatre

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<sup>66</sup> “Once Jakob enters the institute in the film there is no return or even reference to any external place, except, ambiguously, at the very end” (Sorfa 88).

<sup>67</sup> On November 5, 2013, the Quay Brothers were present for a screening of two of their films – *Maska* (2010) and *Un)Mistaken Hands: Ex Voto F.H.* (2013) at SVA. In a talkback following the film, they discussed *The Piano Tuner of EarthQuakes*, and implied that if they could have used a different actress for the role of Malvina (they had someone specific in mind – a dancer), they would have been entirely satisfied with the film. But they were forced to accept a different actress who did not “move” to their satisfaction, and seemed too dependent on the “dialogue.”

are mottled and cold, almost like stone. Blin sits before the piano; Malvina emerges from a doorway into a darkness as heavy as earth. Hovering spotlights violently illuminate their faces, and candles demarcate the path between them. Her voice, preternaturally thick yet agile, resounds through the cavernous space. Suddenly, something goes wrong. She stops singing, the candles flicker, the spotlights go out. She collapses to the floor. One of the guests emerges from the crowd, checks her pulse, and pronounces her dead. He is Dr. Droz. Two of his servants pick up the dead singer, and then they are gone.

After Malvina's death, the film begins anew. We cut to a wide shot of a new location – an island, covered in sandy rocks and sooty trees, and suffused with a watery light. It is Dr. Droz's island. He is master and architect, in control of all aspects of life here, like a puppeteer. Droz is a kind of Captain Nemo figure, with a vast intelligence and demiurgic pretensions.<sup>68</sup> He is not just a scientist and a scholar, but also a composer. His music – which he calls “the most rational irrationality” – has been spurned by society, and he in turn rejects the world. He retires to the island to painstakingly create a place in which that music could be properly appreciated.

Now the moment of his vindication is at hand. He has planned a grand performance, and invited all the most important guests. He conveys Malvina to the island, and resuscitates her (after a death that he most likely caused) to sing his music. Though she is a shade of her former self, her voice is every bit as powerful as before, if not more so. She barely moves, and when she does, her actions are controlled by Droz's authoritative hand. Also for the performance, he has constructed seven elaborate automata, of a very particular sort. Each one is a sort of mechanical “tableaux vivant,” whose figures, when activated, perform a limited

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<sup>68</sup> The film is based in part on a different Jules Verne story – “Carpathian Castle.” So the resemblance to a Verne protagonist is not surprising (PTOE Press Kit).



series of actions (PTOE Press Kit). The automata are also musical instruments. Their gears create otherworldly sounds using hydraulics. Droz hires a piano tuner, Don Felizberto Fernandez, to perfect their tuning in time for the performance. Felizberto happens to look identical to Malvina's lover, Blin, and is indeed played by the same actor.

The openness of this island seems to contrast with the cloistered realm of the theatre we just left. But the island is itself sealed off from the world – the Quays' goal was to create an atmosphere that would be "locked off, utterly remote" (PTOE Press Kit). The island is actually a set, a miniature one, constructed by the Quays. There is no attempt to hide the artificiality of this set – rather the opposite. The silhouette of the trees is too clean, the landscape too flat, the sky an unnatural grey. In fact, the island's artificial contours are constructed of the same mold as the doctor's other automata.<sup>69</sup> Activity there is overseen by a housekeeper (also Droz's lover) and six gardeners/servants who move mechanically and with complete obedience to Droz's slightest commands. These servants are also Droz's patients – recovering from some psychological trauma for which, it seems, total obedience is the cure. At the heart of the island is a cavernous void – Dr. Droz's secret chamber, an actual baroque grotto, which Felizberto admires on his first day. It is governed by the subterranean logic of Victoria Nelson's caves, a realm of dreams and insight. It is here that Droz brings Malvina back to life, and conjures the secret ingredients of his alchemy. This cavern flooded in a previous earthquake, and is now suffused entirely with dark water. These currents are the island's driving force. Towards the end of the film Droz stands in his chamber and peers down onto a glass dome. Within it, he sees the entire island in miniature. His cave is within the island, but the island is also within his cave, contained by its walls and separated by glass.

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<sup>69</sup> "...the landscape, when we created it as a model, was made of cork – we matted those images in, and added sky and water digitally" (PTOE Press Kit).

The island is itself another automaton, sealed off from the world, its hyper controlled movements and machinery powered by water.

What are these mysterious automata – these subtle boxes whose components operate together in a perfectly coordinated movement to produce a hypnotic music? A conversation between Felizberto and Droz provides the answer:

Felizberto: Dr. Droz, are you preparing another automaton?

Droz: In a manner of speaking, yes.

Felizberto: Is it an opera?

Droz: Let's just say, it's my own small contribution to the operatic canon.

Felizberto considers it completely plausible that one of Droz's automatons could be an opera.

In this world, it is logical that a machine could be a performance, and vice versa. That is because these automata are, in fact, theatres. They are small stages enclosed behind glass; they are miniature scenographies of mechanical parts. The Quays use stop-motion animation to portray the world inside the automata. Each one is a scenic box, a diorama, similar to the ones used to create the scenery in *Street of Crocodiles*. They contain a full and vivid puppet life, articulated in miniature.

Part of the Quays' agenda in this film was to force an interaction between their animation work and live action, an interaction that parallels the juxtaposition of theatre with film. The entire film, in their own words, was "conceived very theatrically":

In a sense, it's like having live actors walk around puppet sets. We want that integration – or disintegration at times, because there's also a slippage where you're hoping that the puppet realm is pushing into the live action realm, or vice versa. We were going for an in-between state, where you're not sure which world you're in.  
(PTOE Press kit)

Because of the link between puppet animation and the theatre, as the puppet realm begins to invade the live action, the theatre also begins to infiltrate the film. This "contamination" is not

merely a force within the narrative, but also an essential aspect of their cinematic method, a tool for disorienting the viewer.

The film establishes a productive friction between the cinematic and the theatrical. As in *The Street of Crocodiles*, this tension plays out along the parameters of space and time. In terms of space: the cinematic is allied with the two-dimensional, the large, and the open, where-as the theatrical is represented as miniature, three-dimensional, and closed. Film time marches forwards inexorably. A film in which nothing changes or moves is not a film – it is a picture. Theatrical time, on the other hand, is presented as slower, even static. Within the world of the automata, time moves forwards incredibly slowly, if at all. The tableaux vivants repeat the same actions over and over, time cycling through on a loop. If film time is fleeting and ephemeral, theatrical time endures. The props, scenery, the very materiality of theatre, have a physical permanence that the Quays equate with fixity.

Even as the film establishes these parameters for theatre and film, it challenges and confuses them. The relationship of the small to the large is fluid – as elastic as the rubber band the singer Malvina winds hypnotically around her leg. Open spaces are often presented *within* a closed and theatrical space, and vice versa. A two-dimensional surface of glass encloses a three-dimensional theatrical space. Live actors interact on puppet sets; automata grow to become life-size. Even time seems uncertain of whether to move forwards or stand still. As we saw in *Street of Crocodiles*, film time, though ephemeral, has a flexibility to rewind and to repeat that theatre time does not. The Quays play with time through their use of repetition. A repetition in film is a repetition of the very same event (assuming the same footage is being used). A repetition on stage is always necessarily a different event, even if we attempt to move through exactly the same actions and gestures.

Through the tension between film and theatre, this film negotiates an even deeper divide – the gap between life and death. Throughout the film, the chasm between these states is made unstable. The film begins with a death, but that death is soon reversed with Malvina’s resuscitation. The musical automata, lifeless machines, are deposited out amongst nature, in the woods near the shore, subjected to the assault of wind and salt from the sea air. These develop into layers of decay – rust, mold and rot, which make the automata somehow more alive, rather than less. The very island itself, with its natural and vibrant features is also a dead thing, an artificial set, as I noted above. The island was designed, in fact, to resemble Arnold Böcklin’s painting “Island of the Dead,” an image of a ferryboat approaching the netherworld. The Quays refer to Felizberto as a “liberating Orphic spirit,” indicating that he ventures to this realm of the dead to try and bring a Malvina-Euridyce back with him to the land of the living (PTOE Press kit). The entire film can be seen as a tale of the afterlife.

All of these parameters – life and death, open and closed, past and present – come crashing together at the climax of the film. The culminating event of Dr. Droz’s work is his final automaton, which is simultaneously a live theatrical performance. A stage has been erected in the woods, of similar material and design to the automata. The miniature realm of his automata has been made life size, or so it would appear. The performance is both new and also an uncanny repetition, an echo of the previous concert in which Malvina dies at the beginning of the film. Droz stages the performance intentionally as a double of that first concert. Felizberto takes the role of Blin, and Malvina plays herself. The caretakers become the young girls who dance at the beginning of the concert, and guide Malvina through movements she previously performed spontaneously. Felizberto is both actually Alfonso Blin (since he is the same actor), but he is also pretending to be him, acting a role, theatrically. At times the repetition is a theatrical one – a new presentation of an action very much like one we

have already seen. But the Quays also include filmic repetitions, clips of the original performance, like shards of a broken memory.

At the moment when Malvina had previously died, the whole world seems to rupture and come apart – an earthquake in which theatre and film collide and collapse into each other. In the audience, Blin, the character, has been watching with increasing agitation. He now recognizes the performance for what it is and charges the stage, but finds he is separated from it by impermeable glass. Felizberto, who has been pretending to be Blin, approaches the actual Blin, and each man stares at his own likeness through the glass, which now seems to be a mirror, rather than a transparency. This two dimensional screen-like surface is the mythical “fourth wall” of the stage made solid. The stage is severed firmly from the world by glass, like the automata or a diorama. Felizberto is trapped within the theatrical setting, but his containment is far more profound. During the final scene, in a voice over, Felizberto offers an explanation as mysterious as the performance itself:

I never saved Malvina. I never made it past the sixth automaton. Didn't Droz tell me it was capable of such a thing? And my love for Malvina – was this only an illusion? These thoughts preserve me now, here, inside the sixth automaton, where I dream mechanically with the tides, amongst the rocks, where they can never separate us.

If Felizberto and Malvina never made it past the sixth automaton, then they are still inside it. The theatre was the automaton, and vice versa. This performance, which seemed to be a live event, was in fact mechanical. The large-scale stage was in fact quite small. The performance both never happened, and happens always.

The film's final scene further interweaves film and theatre. As the earthquake shakes the island, we see a shot of the stage from a distance. All the guests have fled, except Blin who simply stands before the stage and stares, defeated. The lens makes it unclear whether Blin is in front of the stage, or within it (of course, he is both, since the same actor is both Blin and

Felizberto). The borders of the proscenium form a neat rectangle in the middle of the filmic frame, surrounded by shifting darkness. Gradually, the image of the stage is replaced by a shot of sea and sky, a softly glowing horizon and gentle waves, in a rectangle of the same size, shape and position. The image is clearly cinematic, as though a film screen has literally taken the place previously occupied by the stage. The entire shot then fades to a new image of the island now flooded by water. The housekeeper, Assumpta, glides across the water in a boat towards one of the automata. Its glass window is now just a few inches above the water. She leans forward and sees something that makes her smile. In the heart of the automaton, nestled within a miniature landscape of wood and earth and moving metal parts, is a small round object, a cross between a magnifying glass lens and a snow globe. Upon its concave surface is a moving image, a tiny film, playing on a loop. As we zoom in to see the film more closely, Felizberto's voice over begins. "I never saved Malvina..."

The clip is an image we have already encountered from earlier in the film, and so is familiar. We recognize it as a past event, though it is now rounded at the edges and bathed in a diffuse light, like a specimen under a microscope. Within the glowing sphere, we see Felizberto approaching Malvina on the bench where she sat every day to watch the sea. The same three seconds – his tentative approach followed by his turn towards the sea – repeats, over and over, a filmic repetition of the same. This ceaseless repetition, coupled with Felizberto's description of mechanical dreaming, intimates an infinity that is also no time at all. This eternal recurrence causes a sense of claustrophobic horror – they are trapped both in a temporal repetition and a physical container.<sup>70</sup> But then, to our immense relief, after the

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<sup>70</sup> The Quays equate spatial confinement with repetition. In describing the power of automata, they note, "They're usually condemned to remain in a loop of actions that they can't go outside" (PTOE Press kit). They use the vocabulary of space to describe temporal limitation.

sixth repetition, something changes: Malvina raises her black veil. The filmic repetition becomes theatrical – becomes “live.” Felizberto utters her name, and we hear her make a vague response. Though they remain contained forever, we end with the dream of new time – a life in death. The automaton contains the film like a theatre its actors, or a coffin its corpse. But the film, by offering the possibility of movement, of an unknown future, takes on a life of its own.

### **Uncanny Theatres Revisited**

The distinguishing feature of the theatrical medium is often considered to be its “live” status. Film, by contrast, offers no actual “living” presence and so is in and of the past. Theatre scholars have recently begun to question the assumption that theatre is always and only “present” and “live.” In her book, “Performing Remains,” on reenactment, Rebecca Schneider has challenged the value of “liveness” in performance, exploring the ways in which theatre can instead present the “past.” The Quay brothers offer the other side of the coin, questioning our assumptions about film. Their work suggests that, rather than dead, film can be very much alive, and theatre can be a medium of death.

*The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* makes this association explicit. The theatres in the film are like black holes, sucking the life around them into their void, an abyss from which nothing can emerge. In the final scene, the film clip struggles to move forwards, to pursue time into the future, but the theatrical container of the automaton holds it back. Like a journey on a Mobius strip, it moves forwards only to return, again and again and again. But the correlation between film and life and theatre and death is even more fundamental for the Quays – it is the basis of their stop-motion process. In between each frame of their puppet films, the Quays are

theatre artists, manipulating physical objects in three-dimensional space. In the majority of their films, they spend extended periods of time in theatres made entirely of dead matter. It is the conversion into film that brings these objects to life – that literally animates the inanimate. Compared to this constant and painstaking vivification, Dr. Droz’s resuscitation of Malvina seems a poor imitation. Of course, we must not make the mistake of thinking that death is some inferior state of being, or that liveness is even the goal. The Quays are disciples of Bruno Schulz, of course, and so agree that dead matter is just a different form of life. The films of the Quay brothers intermingle theatre with film and life with death, and this is the source of their uncanny potency.

We are hardwired to respond with fear when something live appears dead, or vice versa. There is a danger in things which do not move – or rather things which can move but choose not to. The Quays revel in this danger, comparing the stillness in their films to “the praying mantis, whose movements are at times absolutely motionless, disguised as a leaf gently swaying in the breeze, but then suddenly delivering the most deadly attack on its unsuspecting victim” (Delson 24). They recognize that their work activates ancient and basic reflexes. In his book, *The Emotional Brain*, Joseph LeDoux studies the neurological bases of our emotional responses. He writes extensively on fear in specific, and notes that our bodies often respond to fear before our conscious mind does. Visual stimuli act on our autonomous nervous system without our necessarily recognizing what they are.<sup>71</sup> The primal physical response – frozen muscles, a rush of adrenaline, a quickened pulse – endured for the simple reason that it helped us to survive: “Freezing is evolution’s gift to you” (LeDoux 176). Fear momentarily coopted control of the body from the brain, with an unintended consequence. It

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<sup>71</sup> “The automatic response came first, in the evolutionary sense” (LeDoux 175).



allowed time and space for conscious thought to catch up with what the body already knows – time to consider the source of the fear, and to determine how to respond.

The physical and neurological changes of this hypersensitive state of mind correspond to certain recognizable subjective phenomena. The mind in fear experiences a sense of heightened ability and awareness, along with an exaggerated focus.<sup>72</sup> As Torben Grodal explains, fear can create the sensation of time slowing down.<sup>73</sup> These responses are indeed subjective – a clock measures the same five minutes whether I am terrified or comatose – but they are also universal. Grodal argues that the standard conception of objective time is actually misleading. If, while experiencing fear, I watch a ball drop, it will still take five seconds. But I will perceive those seconds slower, as would any mind placed in the same condition. The deceleration is as valid as the clock. Every mind responds to fear in the same way, with the same physical consequences. And the neurological pathways work in reverse. Because we recognize our emotions through our bodily response, if the body is given the phenomenological conditions described above, the mind will experience fear, even if there is no identifiable cause for it.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> This sensation is often considered exhilarating, and helps to explain the uniquely human enjoyment of being afraid – not only our attraction to horror movies, but also the appeal of amusement parks, skydiving and other high-risk behavior.

<sup>73</sup> “...what we colloquially refer to as ‘subjective phenomena’, such as perception and the mental processing of phenomena, are objective in the sense that many of them vary systematically and according to input for all humans. If, for example people are exposed to painful or dangerous experiences they all experience the time of the exposure as longer than clock time...” (Grodal 141).

<sup>74</sup> “It is indeed possible for your brain to know that something is good or bad before it knows exactly what it is” (LeDoux 69). In fact, it is possible to be afraid of something without *ever* knowing what it is. LeDoux tells the story of a brain-damaged patient who was unable to create conscious memories. Her doctor had to introduce himself to her every time he saw her. On one occasion, when he introduced himself, he then shook her hand, pricking her with a tack he had concealed. The next time he tried to shake her hand, she refused. Though she still did not remember the doctor or the tack, she feared his hand. She retained an unconscious

The films of the Quay brothers prompt us to feel fear not because they present content that is frightening. Instead, they recreate the phenomenology of fear, by presenting heightened focus and attention and altered states of temporality. The viewer therefore is prompted to experience fear, and searches the content of the film to explain its source. When we do not find an easy answer, we are left with a lingering sense of apprehension. The result, in other words, is uncanny.

The components that contribute to the experience of fear are also those that the Quay brothers associate with theatre. We have discussed already the way in which containment creates deep focus and even alters the perception of time. The use of miniature further manipulates this sense. Susan Stewart discusses this effect using evidence from an experiment by the School of Architecture at the University of Tennessee:

...researchers had adult subjects observe scale-model environments 1/6, 1/12, and 1/24 of full size. The environments represented lounges and included chipboard furniture as well as scale figures. The subjects were asked to move the scale figures through the environment, to imagine humans to be that scale, and to identify activities appropriate for that space. Then they were asked to imagine themselves to be of "lounge scale" and picture themselves engaging in activities in the lounge. Finally they were asked to tell the researchers when they felt that they had been engaged in such activities for 30 minutes. The experiment showed that 'the experience of temporal duration is compressed relative to the clock in the same proportion as scale-model environments being observed are compressed relative to the full-size environment.' In other words, 30 minutes would be experienced in 5 minutes at 1/12 scale and in 2.5 minutes at 1/24 scale. (Stewart 66)

Miniatures have the power to make the viewer experience time as slower. The Quays create theatres that are both containers and miniatures, capable of bringing time to a standstill. The Quays' brand of uncanny is thus predicated upon the phenomenology of theatre. Without a hermetic container of some kind there is no uncanny experience. Time is too fluid, it slips

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memory caused by the pain he had inflicted. Her body knew something her mind did not (LeDoux 181). I revisit this particular case in discussing Kantorian memory in Chapter 4.

away, like water through a sieve. But within the theatre, life can be frozen, distilled, preserved (in a delectable and imperfect way). The Quays offer theatre as taxidermy.

This is of course, a very specific and limited understanding of theatre, one many theatre scholars would resist. In the scenography issue of *Performance Research*, Arnold Aronson considers the interaction between time and space in the theatre. He notes that the idea of theatre as a closed space (so fundamental to the Quays interpretation) is a primarily Western and relatively recent conception. Furthermore, the Quays' theatre contains but a single version of time. One of the unique aspects of actual theatres is that these containers hold two different temporal registers, as Aronson notes: one onstage, and another in the now of the auditorium (Aronson 85). Aronson draws a useful distinction between these forms of time: "In the context of theatre, we might think of absolute time as that of the spectators – and the world outside the theatre in which they reside – and relative time as the contingent passage of narrative time on the stage" (Aronson 87). The interesting question in most live performance is how those two registers can be reconciled. For the Quay brothers, the theatre is but half a theatre – only a stage. Or rather, they subsume the audience within the world of the stage. In their films, relative time overtakes and overpowers absolute time, or perhaps both are transformed into subjective time. The audience is actually incorporated into the world of the film, including its temporality. They construct a world which spirals infinitely downwards, and position their viewers inside their recursive aesthetic. In the act of watching, we are watched. The darkness on the screen changes the nature of the darkness around us.

The theatre within the film, then, becomes a stricter, but perhaps also more potent version of itself. The same can perhaps be said of film when it is made subservient to theatre. In our increasingly mediatized world, theorists and creators of theatre must negotiate with the products of media, whether directly or indirectly. As a result, much has been written about

the incorporation of media onto the stage, and what effect that may have. In an essay from his book, *Looking into the Abyss*, Arnold Aronson asks the question directly – “Can Theater and Media Speak the same Language?”<sup>75</sup> His answer is a negative, that when film images and projections appear on the stage, they necessarily cause tension and conflict. Such collaboration, he suggests, only works if the “intent is specifically to create a sense of dislocation and disjunction” (Aronson *Looking into the Abyss* 87). Philip Auslander’s book *Liveness* explores the way in which the mediatized transforms our understanding of live performance. Rebecca Schneider argues that the interaction between film and performance demonstrates the need for a more fluid understanding of time and “presentness” on stage.

When considering the tension between film and theatre, however, the exploration is almost always framed from the perspective of theatre – a consideration of what it means when a film object is encountered on a stage. No one asks what it means when a theatre object is encountered in a film, as though it does not mean anything at all. To a certain extent, perhaps it does not have to. Such is the tyranny of film, to translate everything into celluloid (or pixels or bits or bytes). Cinema is a great equalizer – everything on the screen becomes homogenous, made ultimately of the same stuff. But the Quay brothers force us to acknowledge that a theatrical space can maintain a certain autonomy, even in film. They intend for their theatre spaces to create dislocation, to alter the negotiation of cinematic space. Their use of theatres within their films creates an anxious site of claustrophobic immersion.

The dizzying interaction of film and theatre has been explored many times from the opposite angle. For example, Aronson considers the Robert Lepage production of Wagner’s Ring Cycle at the Metropolitan Opera and its extensive use of projections: “By essentially erasing the corporeality of the stage, by seemingly eliminating the concrete reality of the stage,

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<sup>75</sup> See Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss*, 86-96.

there was no longer a framework by which to measure time or distance” (Aronson 92). The projected images eroded the scenic materiality, creating a performance that was not quite film or theatre. And the effect of this medial uncertainty is viscerally disorienting. The viewer is denied the ability to gauge time and space. When presented on stage, a filmed action becomes “an instant or a fragment of past time... surgically inserted into a present timeframe” (Aronson 93). The word surgically suggests incisions, scalpels, stitches – threads and blades passing through flesh, as they do in *The Street of Crocodiles*. Those threads come to take on an even richer meaning in this context, as an articulation of the unstable seam between recorded events and current reception. A past event is produced within a present now. That past becomes frozen within the film, “like insects in amber” (Aronson 93).

To a certain extent this is always true of the presentation of film. At any point that a cinematic image is shown, it is a past time being offered in the present. Why then, is our experience of a filmed event different when it is presented as part of a theatrical performance, rather than in and of itself? As discussed in the above consideration of William Paul’s “Uncanny Theaters,” a theatrical frame heightens and draws attention to the inherent uncanny nature of film. Within the scenography of a theatrical performance, the past-ness of film is heightened. The spectators cannot immerse themselves in that past as a reality, because it is juxtaposed with - contained in - a simultaneously *presented* present. Even if the projected film shows an ostensibly “live” event, it is still removed from us by the certainty of the image being some other where, if not some other when. It is not the fact of being “filmed” alone which freezes the event in the past, but rather the theatrical presentation. The theatre becomes the amber in which the film becomes trapped.

Film and theatre in combination produce a performance that cannot be reduced to one medium or the other. It is both “live” and “dead”, ephemeral and permanent, present and

absent at the same time. On the stage, use of film and video challenge the “liveness” of the performance, and suggest an altered and alternate temporal/spatial reality. On the screen, the theatre can become an icon of permanence and fixity, the container for the ephemeral life equated with the flickering images of film. Theatre has begun increasingly to utilize film as a method for engaging with realm of the dead. Though it seems a paradox, the films of the Quay brothers do the reverse. They use theatre to envision the experience of death. Each art form presents itself as live, and sees in the other an opposite – a kind of death.

Perhaps, however, death cannot be equated to or represented by any medium, but rather can only be approached along the borders between them. A quintessentially liminal experience that is only glimpsed as it disappears, death flirts with crevices and cracks. Perhaps the closest that we can come to understanding it, approximating it, is in the seams between stage and screen, the spaces where the performance is not one or the other, or neither or both.

Film images within theatre prevent full immersion in either film or theatre. But the Quays’ combination of theatre and film has precisely the opposite effect – it creates a more complete absorption than either medium alone. Their immersion of the viewer is not a comfortable event – it is a consumption, predatory and threatening, as destabilizing to the spectator as the distance created by video projections on stage. The film in the theatre, the theatre in the film – each deadens the other, or reveals what is already dead within itself. The unstable interaction threatens at all times to erupt. The Quay brothers welcome that volatility, creating films where cinema and stage endlessly efface each other. These films are palimpsests of contained and containing – like an infinite nest of Russian dolls. This telescopic journey then extends outwards all around us until our spectatorship is contained as well, as our body reflexively, instinctively knows. Like a hunted rodent catching a whiff of the feline, we tense,

and find ourselves at alert. We return to the question that nagged us at the start of this investigation – what dangerous thing hides in the dark and watches us, while when we watch one of their films? The question has no answer, cannot be answered. To answer it would be to immediately extinguish the very source of the Quays' uncanny magic.

## CHAPTER THREE: Dream No More – Hidden Desires in PunchDrunk’s

### *Sleep No More*

*Last night I saw upon the stair,  
A little man who wasn't there.  
He wasn't there again today.  
I wish, I wish he'd go away.*

William Hughes Mearns

*"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.  
"I only wish I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too!"*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*<sup>76</sup>

#### **Part 1 – The Performance of a Dream**

She fell asleep – the young woman in the dark green dress. She was a fellow patron at that performance of *Sleep No More*, sharing the prime vantage point that I prefer for the production’s finale: the king’s box, on the balcony level. I appreciated her taste for irony. I had to admire as well her sheer capacity for sleep, not only while present at a production where most people never cease moving (chasing dancers, climbing stairs, poking through closets), but also while perched somewhat unstably upon the foot wide banister around the box. A slight shift of her body weight to the left, and she would drop down ten feet or so to the great hall in the basement. Most likely the crowds of spectators below would break her fall, but a good injury none-the-less. I had been tempted to take a nap myself in a number of more comfortable locations – one of the many beds in the infirmary on the fifth floor, or in the Macbeths’ master bedroom, or the padded room. I didn’t; I dared not. I was unsure of what would happen if I actually fell asleep. Was it among the few taboos of the production? Would

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*, 217.



one of the many black masked chaperones have slid over, and silently shamed me for an unspoken transgression? Or would I be allowed to sleep, and so doing, sacrifice the opportunity to witness some secret aspect of *Sleep No More*? No one troubled my neighbor, at least, not until the finale came to a close.

It seemed so odd to me, to sleep at *Sleep No More*. I left that performance (my third time attending the production) still thinking about my compatriot in the box, and her little snooze. There was something significant in it, beyond its wry and paradoxical humor. Why not sleep? *Sleep No More* is a unique theatrical experience – a 3 hour immersive encounter loosely based on *Macbeth*, which combines elements of haunted house, dance theatre, film noir and murder mystery. Spectators wander through a warehouse which has been converted into the “McKittrick Hotel” (an overt reference to *Vertigo*). The hotel’s five large floors consist of a variety of scenic environments, including shops and offices, bedrooms, cemeteries, a hospital ward, and a banquet hall. These spaces are executed in intimidating detail – drawers, closets, cabinets are all inhabited. The forms by the hospital beds are filled with notes from unseen doctors for absent patients. The candy in the candy store is real. No space, however humble or small, which the patron can explore has been neglected. These minutiae lend vitality and authenticity to these secret spaces; they seduce the visitor to investigate what is most private and concealed, but simultaneously argue that these rooms have life beyond the scope of our prying eyes and fingers.

Within this environment, the cast of dancers/actors (the work they do is worthy of both titles) appear, engage and disappear, each character pursuing his or her own individual narrative. Spectators encounter these characters and their interactions by chance and witness glimpses of their storylines over the course of the evening. The production gives its spectators license to move about the space and do almost anything they like (short of interfering with the

performance), which includes, if they desire, taking a nap. And yet I couldn't do it. I realized that it seemed so impossible to sleep because every time I enter *Sleep No More*, I feel that I already am sleeping, or rather, dreaming. How can you fall asleep in your own dream? This unusual production recreates the sensation of a dream in real space and time. To encounter the phenomenology of a dream while fully awake transports the audience directly into the realm of the uncanny.

### **On Dreams**

Both performance theorists and reviewers who have attended *Sleep No More* frequently make reference to its dreamlike qualities – some more directly than others. Reviewer Scott Brown of *the Vulture* calls it “the nonsense math of nightmares.”<sup>77</sup> In his response to the production in March, 2012, W. B. Worthen notes, “Here, the audience enters the space rather than observing it, and each spectator’s progress creates a poetic, associative narrative” (82) – dreams of course, being the quintessential “poetic, associative narrative.” Myrto Koumarios and Cassandra Silver, PhD students at the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance at the University of Toronto, identify this quality more explicitly, calling it “an experience akin to the spatial, temporal, and ontological liminality of dreams, hauntings, and the altered perception of insanity” (168). The critical response that ensues is often an attempt to interpret this state of altered perception.

Theorists further agree that the production’s immersive approach is key to its dreamlike effect. As Worthen says, it is important that “the audience *enters* the space” rather than merely “observing” it. The interaction between spectator and space is fundamental to the oneiric quality. Koumarios and Silver likewise call out the importance of the production’s

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<sup>77</sup> See Brown, “Theater Review: The Freakily Immersive Experience of *Sleep No More*.”

architecture: “The physical layout of the performance space, particularly the gradual transition into the fiction through various threshold spaces, is a symbolic manifestation of...liminality” (168). The “threshold spaces” refer to the numerous intermediate locations (hallway, coat check, box office, lobby bar, etc.) that patrons encounter en route to the performance. (When does the performance really begin? It is difficult to pinpoint, showing just how gradually and subtly the spectator is drawn into this alternative realm.) This series of spatial transitions maps onto a mental transformation, as Koumarianos and Silver note. The shift from reality to fiction parallels our journey from the street, each space taking us further into the performance. It is not unlike the transition into hypnosis, the hypnotist constantly encouraging the patient to slip “deeper and deeper” into a trance.<sup>78</sup>

To varying degrees, analysts have attempted to address this altered state by restoring it to something familiar, either by comparison to the text on which the show is “based,” or by calling attention to its recognizable theatrical practices. Koumarianos and Silver draw a connection between the overall nightmarish quality and a very specific set of nightmares. They argue that the mental transformation provoked by *Sleep No More* is a state that “resonate[s] well with the literary Macbeths’ waking and sleeping nightmares...” (Koumarianos and Silver 168). W. B. Worthen also recognizes a specific mental landscape in the scenery of *Sleep No More*:

Sleep No More creates an environment in which our physical sense of disorientation... articulates with a characteristic gesture of the play’s representation of character: ‘cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears’ (3.4.23-24). (Worthen 87)

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<sup>78</sup> Just as in hypnosis, one must enter *Sleep No More* willingly. For those determined to remain “awake,” it is possible to see the electronic earpieces of the show’s crew and technological components behind the production. But for those who are willing, the spell is cast. The dream has already begun.

In *Macbeth*, minds are likened to prisons, labyrinths where the walls are “fears” and more specifically *Macbeth*’s fears. From this metaphorical spatiality, Worthen argues that “*Sleep No More*... reframes a familiar critical perspective on the play” – that experiencing *Macbeth* properly requires an identification with its protagonist (87). To give voice to that perspective, he quotes Alan Sinfield: “The distinctive quality of *Macbeth* derives from the feeling that we enter the consciousness of the protagonist” (quoted in Worthen 87). He suggests that through its specific scenography, *Sleep No More* achieves this exact effect.

Worthen proceeds to argue that despite the audacity of its innovations:

*Sleep No More* is predicated on a surprisingly conventional view of dramatic performance: that the state reveals fully formed, organic, psychologically knowable and responsive “characters” to whom the audience (or, often, readers) respond much as they do to human beings in the social world off the stage. (Worthen 83)

*Sleep No More*, he argues, presents a traditional understanding of “character,” with one adjustment – that space itself also becomes a “character.”<sup>79</sup> According to Worthen, the architecture of *Sleep No More* does not present *Macbeth*, the play – it presents *Macbeth*, the character. While this understanding of character may conform to a traditional paradigm, the very application of that paradigm to space is revolutionary. It implies a space with a mental life — with sentient intention, a space alive with uncanny malevolence. He calls attention to a familiar critical approach, but downplays the extraordinary application of that approach. Worthen’s goal is to reveal the traditional tendencies within *Sleep No More*’s performance practice, but in so doing, he underplays the power of its unique uncanny effect.

The familiar theatrical paradigm that Worthen references is text-based, rather than tactile or visual: he likens the experience of attending *Sleep No More* to the act of reading. He

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<sup>79</sup> Director Felix Barrett’s intentions support this understanding of space. In an interview contained within the *SNM* supplemental playbill, Barrett claims, “The spaces are as autonomous and complex as the characters themselves...” (29).

notes the distinction made by Charles Lamb between the experience of reading and seeing Shakespeare – “while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear – we are in his mind” and suggests that, “in *Sleep No More* it is the performance that makes us feel ‘we are in his mind’” (Worthen 88). The logic implied in Lamb’s formulation, however, is flawed. It is based on the assumption that *being Lear* and *being in his mind* are the same thing. Immersion, however, is not identification.

As the protagonists and creators of our own “associative narrative,” we may feel that we are in Macbeth’s mind, but we are decidedly not Macbeth. Our role as independent individuals is equally essential to the dreamlike experience. We experience everything in the first person – not vicariously, but actually. Psychoanalysis provides thousands of samples of dream records, and nearly every one begins with some variation of the phrase, “I am....” Each then continues distinctly – just insert the appropriate action or location (i.e. *standing in a field*, or *in my kindergarten classroom*, or *walking with my mother*)<sup>80</sup> – but the framework remains consistent. All dreams are experienced in the first person.<sup>81</sup> If I dream I am someone else, even Lear or Macbeth, I am still myself, dreaming. My thoughts and feelings remain my own. Just as in a dream, the performance of *Sleep No More* is ultimately entirely about the spectator himself. The only narrative that the production establishes is the one which begins with your entrance into the space, and ends with your departure. Only you know what you saw, or did not see.

W. B. Worthen views this independence as illusory, and argues that in fact “we are less the agents of the performance than its furniture” (Worthen 95). He emphasizes the marked

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<sup>80</sup> Or “*playing in my backyard in the sepia light of late afternoon and early childhood...*”

<sup>81</sup> As Freud himself asserted: “[E]very dream deals with the dreamer himself. Dreams are completely egotistical” (*Interpretation of Dreams* 338).

difference between spectators and performers, by which the latter can take part in the hyper-controlled performance, but the former can only “spectate.” If we were truly in control of the performance, he implies, we could interact with the performers or somehow alter the progress of the narrative.<sup>82</sup> He is of course, correct, if we were going to be considered equal participants. But if we are not agents, but rather dreamers, there is no such expectation. A certain tension between passivity and agency is inherent to the dream phenomenon. In dreaming, we are very much the protagonist, and yet simultaneously subject to unexpected shifts of space and time, beyond our felt control.

Worthen concludes: “Despite its *eventness*, *Sleep No More* immerses its audience in a paradoxical practice: we write our individualized plotlines in our own movements, but are constructed within the spectacle as realist voyeurs, watchers, and *readers*, not agents” (Worthen 96). In order to explain this unfamiliar encounter in familiar terms, Worthen frames it as paradox – a juxtaposition of irreconcilable elements – in which control over our movement cannot coincide with a lack of control over the spectacle. As theatre or text, perhaps not. But as a dream, of course.

By virtue of its fragmentary and poetic logic, its direct immediacy of individual experience, and the psychological resonance of its approach to space and time, *Sleep No More* better resembles a dream than any familiar form of theatre or literature. *Sleep No More* is *Macbeth* as one might dream of *Macbeth*. While I understand the desire to approach it as a

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<sup>82</sup> For Koumarianos and Silver, this tension between being passive and active causes discomfort, and “problematizes the spectator’s sense of aesthetic distance” (169). The authors feel conflicted in their responses to the “erotic and aggressive” scenes on display, and suggest that they feel a “compulsion to intervene” against which they have to “struggle” (169-170). I felt no such compulsion – rather, I felt there was no possibility of intervention. In fact, the division between spectators and performers seemed abundantly clear, established by a completely distinct style of dress and movement, and most of all by our masks. I did, however, feel in control of the choice of where to direct my gaze and my body, and in that regard, never questioned my agency.

performance or as a text, these attempts will necessarily diminish the production's value as felt experience, in much the same way as a magic trick explained. Worthen's exploration of *Sleep No More* is a sophisticated and subtle analysis, but like any analysis, it dissects the totality of the event, and therefore sacrifices the feeling of the organic whole. Equating the experience of the audience with the act of reading ignores the essential contribution of the sensual realm, a fundamental (if not actually, *the* fundamental) component of the performance.

Recent developments in the study of dreams increasingly recognize the importance of the sensual world for both the experience and generation of our nocturnal fantasies. Contemporary cognitive scientists and neurologists are in the process of exploring the intimate entanglement between mind and body as manifested in dreams. G. William Domhoff, in particular, has put forth a theory that "dreams are embodied simulations" (Domhoff 232). The meaning of embodiment in cognitive science is complex and multi-faceted. It does not simply mean the fact that our brains inhabit our bodies, though this is of course a significant aspect of it. The concept can refer to any aspect of the body's essential relationship to mental activity – whether that be as the biological backdrop for neurological engagement, a direct influence on conscious or unconscious thought, or the corporeal knowledge which then translates into the realm of abstract thought via metaphor and language. In identifying dreams as a form of "embodiment," Domhoff means the term in at least three distinct ways. Dreams are embodied "in the sense that areas in the brain supporting visual and sensorimotor imagery are activated" – in other words, in a basic biological sense. This biophysical reality corresponds to our perception of the dream: "the imagery is subjectively "felt" as the experienced body in action" (Domhoff 232-233). In this sense, he suggests, they are "simulations" of our actual bodily experience. But furthermore, Domhoff suggests that the images of a dream themselves "embody" our thoughts, in a very "literal sense" – that they

translate our ideas, concerns and anxieties into physical representation. In this tertiary sense, dream images operate in the manner of metaphor and figurative language, which uses our corporeal knowledge as a template for expressing and understanding more abstract concepts.

According to Domhoff, a dream is necessarily something we “feel” with our bodies rather than an abstract act of imagination. The sensual qualities of our dreams are as important as whatever symbolism or interpretation we may find in them. To convey the embodiment of dreams, Domhoff adopts the language of theatre, claiming that dreams “dramatize the... dreamer’s cognitive structure. ... [A]s literal embodiments, dreams are more like plays than any other waking analog because they include settings, characters, social interactions, and emotions” (233). *Sleep No More* provides a kind of reflection of Domhoff’s theory – rather than a dream being experienced as a performance, it is a performance experienced as a dream.

The production’s somnambulistic sensuality cries out for a different kind of method – one which can (more) directly access the production as aggregate experience. That method is phenomenology: “an attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is” (Merleau-Ponty xx).<sup>83</sup> Phenomenology grounds its investigation in our perceptions, rather than our understanding, and pursues a different kind of meaning, “the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other” (Merleau-Ponty xxxiv). Such meaning will necessarily be inseparable from the experience itself. As a practice, phenomenology does not

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<sup>83</sup> Phenomenological experience, according to Raymond W. Gibbs, is actually one of the main ways cognitive science can approach the idea of “embodiment.” In his introduction to *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*, he gives a review of the various ways in which “embodiment” can be understood, and identifies at least three forms of understanding and investigating this concept: as “neural events, the cognitive unconscious, and phenomenological experience” (10).



distinguish between dreams and reality, making it an ideal method for exploring a dream. Illusions and fantasies are as much a part of our perceptual process as “real life,” and are therefore granted the same value for phenomenological investigation.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout this dissertation, I make use of phenomenological techniques to approach the uncanny as we perceive it in body and mind. The method, with its ability to navigate *Sleep No More's* hypnagogic fantasies, is perhaps most directly useful for the subject of this particular chapter. I attempt to address *Sleep No More* on its own terms, as a combination of sensation and imagination. Rather than rationalize the dream, I propose to embrace it, and to allow the production to maintain its oneiric status as far as possible. Though I do ultimately argue for a particular meaning to this dream, that significance is best presented through a slow and meditative encounter with the production itself.

In entering the territory of dreams, this chapter is somewhat haunted by Freud. His spirit is, of course, a palpable presence throughout this dissertation for his axiomatic role in shaping thoughts on the uncanny. In attempting to understand the uncanny, Freud treated it much like a dream in need of interpreting. It is by only slight extension that I treat this uncanny production in the same way. This chapter investigates what meaning may hide within the dream of *Sleep No More* – a Freudian formulation. But it is equally an exploration of embodiment, of what thoughts are being expressed and even created in the sensual textures of this labyrinthine encounter.

I construct this chapter as a mirror, to reflect back onto *Sleep No More* the very qualities that make it so compelling and so enigmatic. Such a mirror will of necessity be a *broken* mirror, one which operates through fragmentation out of respect for the fragmentary and associative

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<sup>84</sup> “[A]mbiguity, illusions, and mirages, are fundamental aspects of the perceptual synergy out of which our so-called “objective” constructions are built” (Hass 38).

trajectory of this landscape. The organization is part phenomenology and part dream interpretation. The methods are not so unlike – both involve extensive description, association and patience. The heart of this chapter is a kind of dream-book, an exploration of the dream through its themes and recurring elements. Even as neurologists have become skeptical of “symbolism” in dreams, they still use techniques of content analysis that track and even quantify the key figures and concepts in dreams to reveal their significance.<sup>85</sup> Recognizing that it is through the manipulation of space that *Sleep No More* achieves its dream-nature, I identify the production’s salient elements in spatial terms – such as doors and hallways and basements. This next section is also, therefore, an act of homage to Gaston Bachelard and his *Poetics of Space* – that unparalleled meditation on spatial phenomenology. Following his model, I engage with these spatial components individually, allowing each to suggest connections and meanings, to create a network of significance that may not immediately be clear. Each element may draw our attention momentarily, suggesting links to the myriad source material of the production (which includes, of course *Macbeth*, but also film noir, Hitchcock, murder mysteries and witch trials) and beyond. The only restriction on these connections will be the limits of the reader’s patience, because it is often in the unexpected connections that meaning hides.

Naturally, there will be overlap between these sections, and there is no one path through them. I have roughly organized the sections into the order in which an audience member would be likely to encounter them (the doors before the hallway), but likely does not mean necessary. Like the audience members of *Sleep No More*, the reader is here invited to choose his or her own way through this material, and to explore at his or her own pace. The

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<sup>85</sup> Domhoff is particularly drawn to the Hall and Van de Castle coding system, and used it to analyze a series of dreams from a widower about his dead wife.

sections can be read in any order, but whatever path one takes, I argue that it will lead to the same ultimate understanding. *Sleep No More* combines a sense of nostalgia with the thrill of voyeurism and the threat of obscure danger. Its complex and enigmatic emotional topography must be felt as well as named. By encountering *Sleep No More* as a dream, we gradually begin to sense the presence of an underlying purpose, a hidden desire which the production both embodies and gratifies.

## Part 2 - The Poetics of a Dream

### DOORS

*Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again... (Rebecca)*

Hitchcock's *Rebecca* is dominated by the mansion – the hulking gothic density of Manderley. Hitchcock revels in this environment, carving and sculpting its weighty darkness around his characters. The ample shadows are a more tangible presence than the light which occasionally interrupts them. Everything about the house is oversized, most especially of course, the giant doors – doors so large that the handles are located much higher than the comfortable reach of the hand. They sit at shoulder height to actress Joan Fontaine, dwarfing her beyond her naturally diminutive stature.

The house is divided into an east and a west wing – a division which *Sleep No More* references in the staircases at opposing ends of the installation.<sup>86</sup> The west wing is the source of menace. Behind a massy double door is the room once occupied by the former Mrs. De Winter – a room Mrs. Danvers has preserved for her, and where the heart of its former occupant still seems to palpably beat. Behind the doors of Manderley, secrets are not only

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<sup>86</sup> “Each floor is large and flanked by stairwells marked “E” and “W” – the only real orientation we receive during the evening” (Worthen 80).

held, they are kept alive. These secrets animate the very doors themselves. When the new Mrs. De Winter stumbles upon Rebecca's boathouse, the door opens seemingly of its own accord. Hitchcock's camera focuses on the lower corner as it sweeps back across the floor, as though propelled by phantoms. Though we later discover it was opened by the simple-minded Ben, the effect lingers, marking the door itself sinister. Rebecca lives on here, in the very walls themselves.

Doors mark the border between that which is secret and that which is exposed. They contain an inherent capacity to reveal or conceal, a capacity which turns uncanny when it is abstracted from logical explanation. The doors of *Sleep No More* exemplify and exaggerate this role. The entire performance takes place in an interior realm, which is accessed through two rather nondescript doors off 27<sup>th</sup> street. Videos and photographs and all cell phones are prohibited in this space, keeping the nature of the performance as covert as possible. This secrecy is intended to protect the sense of mystery about the production, but works equally well to promote speculation and rumor among those who have not yet visited. It is a secret begging to be shared.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In a startling exception to the general prohibition against photography, certain events at *Sleep No More* are actually hyper-documented. Their "festivals" or themed nights for holidays such as Halloween and Valentine's Day are photographed, and those photographs are available on their website for all to see. The website also now provides pictures and even video from the production itself, but those provide only glimpses into what actually takes place. The video is not an actual recording of any aspect of the performance, but rather a series of snippets of various scenes, lasting no longer than 2 seconds. Some are just momentary flashes – enough to tantalize and tempt, but without revealing any actual content from the performance.

The doors of *Sleep No More* perform a rupture, fragmenting an already allusive narrative.<sup>88</sup> The doors permit the presence of actual palpable danger. Upon my first visit, I recall entering one room that was unoccupied – a kind of drawing room or sitting room in shades of stale pink and orange. I sat a moment on the love seat and sifted through some of the blankets and clothes before deciding to move on. I tried another door, which I thought might open up a closet, and found it locked. For some reason, I decided to put my ear to the door for a minute. The next moment, I heard a scratching sound, as though someone on the other side had raked his or her fingernails across the surface of the door. I pulled away – legitimately frightened, and not for the last time that evening. The door remained closed, but fundamentally altered. As I stared at it now, the door stared back at me. Eventually, its silent observations overpowered my curiosity and I walked away. For the moment, *Sleep No More* retained one of its many secrets.

While this door produced its chill through its solidity, other doors obtained power via their permeability. Once a door has been opened, there is the danger that it could again close – this time, behind you. On my second visit, I spent some time in a dark and narrow room at one end of the fourth floor, one whose purpose, it seems, is interrogation – and painful interrogation at that. A light bulb hung over a wooden chair with restraints for the arms and legs. Unpleasant things happen here. When I entered, the room was nearly completely black. The light bulb was off, and the only illumination entered slantwise through the doorway. I discovered the contents of the room as much by touch as by straining my eyes. Minutes after I'd left the room, two characters entered with a number of masked witnesses in hot pursuit. The door that had opened to admit some of them then slammed shut. I approached and tried

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<sup>88</sup> “The performance seems to be caught on the fly, in bits and pieces, choreographed in such a way as to make following a single performer for the duration nearly impossible (in fact, it *is* impossible: performers occasionally exit through a door closed to us).” (Worthen 82)

the door to discover that it was now locked. I was locked out, but perhaps equally disturbing, they were all locked in. Noises began to emerge from the room – bodies banging against its cold metal walls, grunts and shouts. Whatever those “fortunate” witnesses were watching, it could hardly have matched my imagination of what was taking place.

Within the walls of *Sleep No More* doors are often this dangerous. Audience members are frequently pulled into private rooms, alone with a single performer. Depending on your perspective, these patrons either receive the “gift” of a unique experience, or they are forced to participate in a controlled and controlling script. These moments often feature the only instances of text in the production. Not all audience members who have taken part in these performances have found them rewarding.<sup>89</sup>

In his 2005 book on scenography, *Looking into the Abyss*, Arnold Aronson dedicates a chapter to the power of the door on stage, and how that potency is diminished in television and cinema. He suggests that the theatrical door was a revelation – perhaps even theatre’s first technological innovation. Reviewing the early history of the stage, Aronson demonstrates how the introduction of the door in ancient Greek theatre transformed the very nature of performance (55). The door made possible the division of the stage into “two separate spaces: the world seen, and the world unseen; the known and the unknown; the tangible and the implied” (54). The immensity of this potential cannot be overstated. As Aronson explains, “Every time a door opens on the stage, a cosmos of infinite possibility is momentarily made manifest; every time a door closes, certain possibilities are extinguished and we experience a form of death” (54). Aronson further argues that the door altered the very dimensions of space and time on the stage: “A processional rhythm was replaced with what we might now

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<sup>89</sup> I attended the performance on one occasion with a scenic designer who is both a colleague and friend. After having been trapped in a closet for one such performance, she actually left the show. We found her afterwards at a nearby bar.

call a cinematic rhythm.... the door – and the illusion it created – allowed an intercutting of scenes that had the effect of telescoping time and space” (56). The doors of *Sleep No More* achieve exactly this kind of altered reality, literally allowing for a cutting between scenes and events by virtue of our passing through them. Ironically, however, while a door on stage allows theatre to become more cinematic, Aronson suggests that a film door is far more mundane: “The audience of television or film expects – in a way it does not in the theater – to be able to move through doors, windows, walls and space in general” (65). The door of television and cinema is hardly an obstacle to our sight, and therefore loses much of its power. The doors of *Sleep No More*, however, are at once both permeable and domineering – they invite us to cross through them, to trespass, to discover what they conceal, but also retain their power to slam shut and seal themselves, to refuse the twist of a doorknob. As such, they are a sort of hybrid between the theatrical and the cinematic door, ripe with the promise of traversable space, but retaining all the potential danger of a theatrical solidity.

What is so frightening about a closed door? And why can't we resist opening it? We are all like Bluebeard's wife – determined to look behind the closed door, even if it ruins us. In Bela Bartok's operatic version of the tale, Bluebeard brings his fourth wife, Judith, home to his dark and cloistered castle enclosed by seven heavy doors. Despite his protests, she opens each door, one by one, to reveal scenes of great beauty as well as horror. Behind the seventh door she discovers his first three wives – not dead, but trapped in a kind of infinite limbo, in which she also becomes imprisoned. From the moment she opens the door, she is already caught. Like Pandora's box, the fatal and inevitable mistake is to look. To open the door is to see, and to see is to be trapped in a kind of death in life. The doors of *Sleep No More*, like the doors of Bluebeard's castle, imply that spectatorship itself is dangerous.

## HALLWAYS

After a short wait on line outside, patrons of *Sleep No More* (guests of the hotel) are ushered through a dark hallway. The box office and coat check (you can't carry anything with you – the only baggage you can keep is psychological) glow in isolation like lanterns or memories. Then it's up a series of stairs, through a nearly pitch black labyrinthine passage, and into the "hotel bar." This is yet another holding space, heavy and musty and velvet; the whole room is the color of dried blood. From here, small groups of spectators are called by number to enter the performance. Each batch waits in an anteroom before the weighty door that will soon open to admit them. But there is yet another transition to make. The door does not provide direct access to the performance space – instead, it opens to reveal an elevator, which transports the group to the various different floors of the space. Like so many of the spaces within *Sleep No More's* landscape, what appears to be an endpoint is really just another passageway, an access point into deeper and deeper realms of mystery. An escort/elevator operator allows only a few passengers off at a time, further dividing and fracturing any sense of community. We are each, it seems, on our own.

The main portion of the fourth floor is, oddly, a cobblestone street, lined with shops and storefronts on either side. Instead of street lamps, ceiling lights overhead pour isolated pools of light onto the path at regular intervals. Above those lamps, the roof – a covering which is also the floor of the infirmary or the forest – blends into the darkness. This is a hallway masquerading as a street, with numerous entryways and exits. Each door leads off in a different direction, towards paths that mostly return you to this main corridor by some new access point.

The forest on the top floor is arranged like a labyrinth. Tall reeds and branches are organized into regular shapes, designating specific paths that are accessible, leading otherwise



to dead ends. At one such dead end is a wooden hut, riddled with crevices and holes that invite a peering eye. I watched as a nurse invited one spectator, a young woman, into this space. She closed the door behind her guest and locked it. The nurse removed the young woman's mask, and poured her a cup of tea. She whispered words I could not hear, and placed something in the woman's hand. Then abruptly she ushered the woman out through a hidden door on the opposite side of the hut, a door which was inaccessible from outside. The woman disappeared, and I do not know where she reemerged.

The production is articulated through this seemingly endless parade of transitional spaces. Freud would suggest an erotic explanation for all these hallways in our dreamscape – these dark and lengthy passages, into which one may enter and from which one may also emerge. He was fascinated by “the frequency with which buildings, localities and landscapes are employed as symbolic representations of the body, and in particular (with constant reiteration) of the genitals” (*Interpretation of Dreams* 378). In his dream analyses, hallways frequently symbolized the vagina, and traversing those hallways represented sex. To apply that symbolism here is not entirely inappropriate. These channels and corridors are undeniably sexy; they are a part of the production's erotic allure. And if they are suggestive of the passageway by which we enter or depart the womb, so much the better. These spaces have the power to not only transport but also transform their occupants. As Koumarios and Silver note, “A seemingly inexhaustible store of rooms and spaces lead to (and away from) other spaces, often through secret entryways: these spaces always harbor other spaces within” (169). The hallways of *Sleep No More* are productive – even generative.

The foundation of this landscape seems to be transformation itself. The passages are illogical; they impersonate something other than what they are. The “room” behind a heavy metal door turns out to be an elevator. Enter a closet, and discover that it has no back, that it

in fact stretches deep into the interior of the hotel, and releases you into a completely different environment than you entered, like a character in a C.S. Lewis novel. The power of a hallway to carry us from one place to another is exaggerated, as the hallways become capable of traversing completely distinct environments, qualities, time zones. Basic directions are confused and conflated, so that going within can also be a journey across, or a descent. The hallway is a potent tool in creating a space without logic, or rather with a logic all its own.

The laws that govern this space seem in fact more cinematic than theatrical. Susan Sontag in discussing the tensions between theatre and film notes the essentially differing parameters for space.<sup>90</sup> In fact, she suggests that the use of space may be the fundamental distinction between the two art forms:

If an irreducible distinction between theatre and cinema does exist, it may be this. Theatre is confined to a logical or *continuous* use of space. Cinema (through editing, that is, through the change of shot – which is the basic unit of film construction) has access to an alogical or *discontinuous* use of space. In the theatre, people are either in the stage space or “off.” When “on,” they are always visible or visualizable in contiguity with each other. In the cinema, no such relation is necessarily visible or even visualizable... (Sontag 29)

The hallways and passages of *Sleep No More* create an experience of discontinuous space, just as Sontag here describes. In a sense the hallways take the place of cuts or transitions between shots, with the added sensation of that transitional space as real. Furthermore, there is a great deal of action within the production that is not visible or visualizable – in fact, the majority of what takes place is not available to the spectator (at least not in one visit).

Undeniably, the spectator does provide a certain continuity of his own, even when shifting from one unexpected space to the next. But Sontag would not necessarily view this

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<sup>90</sup> She quotes Panofsky’s observation that “in the theatre... ‘space is static’... while in the cinema ‘the spectator occupies a fixed seat, but only physically, not as the subject of an aesthetic experience’” (Sontag 27). She stresses that Panofsky is equating the theatre with “plays” which is insufficient, as immersive theatre (such as *SNM*) demonstrates. Nevertheless, she agrees that a fundamental distinction between theatrical space and cinematic space exists.

continuity as any less cinematic. In this same discussion, she considers the classification of films which “emphasize spatial continuities, like Hitchcock’s virtuoso *Rope* or the daringly anachronistic *Gertrud*” (Sontag 29). Even here, she claims that the treatment of space is not inherently more theatrical: “The longer and longer “takes” toward which sound films have been moving are, in themselves, neither more nor less cinematic than the short “takes” characteristic of silent” (Sontag 29). The continuity of a shot cannot make a filmed space “less cinematic.” And the continuity of the viewer in *Sleep No More* does not mitigate the sensation that he or she has entered an alternative realm of space and time.

The hallway is at all times a possibility – anything can be a portal. A closet, a wooden hut in a forest, a box – each of these can carry the patron to a new and unexpected journey. These hallways convert the space from mere inanimate architecture to a conscious, active presence. Space itself is sentient. It has its own logic, into which we willingly enter. It carries us along. We can choose to walk through a door, but we cannot choose where that door will lead. The space knows where we will go, and the space itself decides if we can enter, and if we can come back.

## MIRRORS

A child’s bedroom – its implicit owners are Macduff’s children. The room is mildly disorderly giving off a lingering aura of children who are no longer present. Toys and books are set down carelessly, waiting to be picked up again, or put away properly. The occupants of this room will return – the books say. They have not left forever. But the layers of dust and musty odor negate that promise. Against one wall, there is a full-length mirror. From one angle, the mirror reflects the room as is. But stand before it at a certain specific angle, and it becomes a horror show. Bed unmade and covered with blood – evidence of carnage on the

walls and floor. All that is missing are the actual bodies of the children, but they are hardly necessary to prove the slaughter that was here. Even as it reveals this new reality, the mirror continues to be somewhat reflective, so that my own reflection intermingles with the gore. Shudder. This mirror, one of the most potent of *Sleep No More's* many "tricks" continues to haunt spectators long after their visit is complete.

Which room is real? The one we stand in? Where the paradoxical absence of children can't quite be resolved? Or the reflection, where violence so thoroughly explains their disappearance? Yes, I physically stand in one of these rooms. But my physical presence is proving increasingly weak as a foundation for "reality" within these walls. As a director, I recognize that this effect requires that there be two rooms, one simply a bloody reversal of the other, with the trick mirror between them. Both rooms are physically REAL, If there were access to it, I could go and stand in the bloody one just as I do here. But there is no access to that other room. The only way to inhabit it is in the mirror itself. And it is there that we are, and also very much are not. And if we are not in the other room, the room of "reflection," then it seems, we are also not *here*. We are walking, breathing, watching, uncanny spectres – throughout *Sleep No More*, but in this room most of all.

There are no children. Their bodies are definitively NOT present. Neither the living bodies at play on one side of the mirror, nor the mutilated corpses on the other – in neither realm are there actual children. And yet, their existence is constructed in its entirety through this faulty mirror. These two spaces conjure up children for the very purpose of destroying them. They imply live children to intensify the shock of their death. On some level, this room, with its sinister mirror, forms a microcosm of the entire experience of the uncanny. That which is there and not there. That which is being covered up and being revealed, and both held in tension by one imperfect and hideous reflection.

The experience is an exaggeration, a perturbation of one of our most basic mental capacities – the counterfactual. In order for the absence of children in this room to distress us, we must first be able to imagine the children that should be here. The brain is able then to actively hold on to the awareness of both the possibility of children and the reality of their absence. For cognitive scientists Fauconnier and Turner, this ability is the very foundation of advanced human thought, and explains how we engage with the world on all levels from the philosophical to the mundane. “Conceptual blending,” as they call it, is something we do all the time. It can be as simple as looking into the refrigerator and realizing you need more milk. In order to see “no milk” you must also be able to conceive of a refrigerator with “milk.”<sup>91</sup> In its daily use, blending is so natural that we do not notice it. It is only when the blend becomes traumatic that it disturbs us and becomes uncanny.

*Sleep No More* actively creates this trauma of duality. Throughout the performance, there are no children, a fact that in itself should not be alarming. But it is the effort that goes into presenting *no* children that makes it disturbing. It is an active absence. If they had simply never been there, then there would be no dissonance. But in this space, youth and its corresponding innocence have been hollowed out – scooped out with a jagged spoon, in order to leave their traces behind... an aesthetic dilation and curettage.

The effect of this trauma is to expose the tension inherent in the counterfactual itself. If what is absent is simultaneously present, then what is present can also be absent. As the mirror produces the absence of children, it simultaneously erases our very own presence. We are made ghosts; we fade away. And this act of disembodiment becomes the very function of the mirror. Like a newborn vampire, or like Hoffmann losing his reflection, we watch

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<sup>91</sup> For an in depth exploration of cognitive blending, see Fauconnier and Turner, 29.

ourselves disappear. In this opaque transparency, we become like the dead children ourselves – the specters that haunt the halls of *Sleep No More*.

There is one baby in the production, found in a room far from this bedroom. Here the witches gather for their orgy, and in the process, Hecate gives birth to a stillborn child. It is not a real infant – rather it is a plastic doll, swimming in a pool of stage blood and non-descript fluid. But it is also a dead child. So this piece of plastic dies twice over. And the witch raises up the dead doll, this theatrical artifice of a dead child, and mimes the act of nursing, relishing the absence of life as she mocks it. Here, there are only dead children, worse still, only fake dead children, which reaffirms that children themselves are impossible. In a space filled with the taxidermied bodies of deer and birds, bodies which at least once could assert a claim to life, the only body that is fake, that is fake entirely, is this child. Its death is again therefore an active process. The plastic doll had to be “imagined” real before its death could be meaningful. The very actions that the witches engage in with its poor plastic figure exaggerate this imagined life. And so its very *artificiality* performs the role of the uncanny mirror. It confirms and proclaims the absence of children in this space.

In such an environment, mirrors can never be simple. They are never “just a mirror.” The mirror divides the dead from the living; it even separates us from ourselves. I entered another room containing what looked like an embalming table, and walked across it towards a hallway to see where it led. As I approached, I saw another spectator coming towards me, and paused and stepped aside to let her pass. To my surprise, she did the same. It took me several seconds to realize that I was in fact she. I was approaching a mirror, not a hallway. I had looked at my reflection, another wanderer in a mask, and failed to recognize myself.

In a footnote to his essay on the uncanny, Freud himself recalls the unsettling sensation of encountering his own reflection as a stranger. Alone in his train compartment, the

door of the toilet swung open, and he saw a man enter “in a dressing gown and travelling cap.” When he jumped up to redirect the “intruder,” he realized that the elderly person was in fact himself. He recalls that he “found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant” (*The Uncanny* 162). He relegates this experience to a mere footnote, downplaying its significance both personally, and for his inquiry. Throughout his essay, Freud suggests that he rarely experiences the sensation of the uncanny himself, that rather, his fascination is the result of pure intellectual curiosity. Because he argues that the phenomenon is the result of repression, a particular sensitivity to the uncanny implies pathology and/or weakness. His own lack of susceptibility becomes a matter of pride. And yet, he can’t resist recounting this particular episode, suggesting that it affected him even more than he admits.

Many others have noted the power of the mirror to make us uncanny to ourselves, including Jean Epstein: “Sometimes, as you dash in to the foyer of an hotel, a double or triple play of mirrors offers you a strange and unexpected meeting with yourself. At first you do not recognize yourself” (quoted in Stern, 355). Epstein goes to describe how this sensation parallels our experience of film. In her own essay on uncanny film, Lesley Stern expands upon Epstein’s formulation to explain how certain films absorb their spectators “into the situation of indeterminacy, of the passing present, the instability and fragility of presence, the discontinuity of the body” (355). She suggests that uncanny films are themselves the most unsettling kind of mirror, one that distorts even as it reflects. The mirrors of *Sleep No More* perform just such a cinematic function, destabilizing the body of the spectator and troubling their sense of presence.

## **BASEMENTS**

There's a theatre in the basement. In fact this is the ground floor, but the subterranean sensation is so powerful that I cannot refer to it as anything other than basement. In their films, the Quay Brothers established and exploited the association of dark and cloistered spaces with theatrical environments (Chapter 2). Through their recursive narratives and the manipulation of theatrical space within their films, they projected that environment outwards to envelop the spectator in a dangerously sentient space. *Sleep No More* forms an uncanny reflection of that immersive gesture. If the Quay Brothers project a theatre outwards around a spectator, *Sleep No More* absorbs the spectator within its (self)conscious theatre. As such, the basement emblemizes the entire production, in which the spectator has been within a theatre from the very start.

There is a theatre in the basement, and the basement is a theatre. The space serves a multitude of functions. It is simultaneously a ballroom, a banquet hall, and a forest, but more than all of these (or perhaps, *because* it is all of these), it is a theatre. The room's organization echoes Shakespeare's Globe: at one end is a shallow platform raised over a plaza for spectators, framed by a wall which acts as proscenium. Along the three other walls, a balcony around the space creates the effect of boxes, which direct all gaze, above and below, toward the main stage.

The plot threads of the performance intertwine and intermingle here. Like Rome, all roads ultimately end here, as all performers and plotlines converge upon this point for the production's grand finale. Throughout the evening, characters congregate and pass through this space on their way to or from other events. Here we encounter characters en route to their deaths, and sometimes (because of the production's repetitions) characters dance through here who have already died (once or twice). This is a theatre where the dead still walk. Though of course, in any theatre, the characters are not quite alive to begin with. They



are not “real” and have no life of their own. All theatre is zombie theatre, a ballad of the living dead. But when the theatre presents ghosts, or when a dead character rises up in order to walk off the stage or make an exit, we must confront those zombies directly. We recognize that these are revenants in the most powerful sense of that word. They have come before, and will come again, and again. This eternal return articulates both their life and their death.

There are ghosts in the basement. The finale self-consciously revels in their presence. The characters of the evening gather at Macbeth’s banquet, at a table upon the raised stage. They drink and debauch. Then the mood shifts. Backlighting obscures facial features as the movement of these inebriated guests slows. They painstakingly shift their limbs, as though the space has been filled with an invisible quicksand that each movement must carve through. The ghost of Banquo makes his way across the rear of the stage methodically, eyes fixed upon Macbeth at the head of the table. It is as though the weight of his death, of his “being dead,” creates a temporal shift in which time cannot flow, or can barely flow. At this pace, past death, future death, and imminent present death coexist. The dead intermingle with the living, hinder their breath, and obstruct their vital motions.

Banquo exits, and Macbeth is brought onto the table – a noose wrapped around his neck. A pulsing beat crescendos in hidden speakers. The room goes black, and something snaps – the chair on which Macbeth had been standing, or the rope around his neck. The light returns to reveal his body swinging just over the heads of the audience below. The creak of the swinging rope is amplified, while a song begins to play... “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.” Ushers and dancers encourage the audience away from the stage and back towards the bar. The body continues to swing limply – dead character, live actor. His pendular progress dominates the emptying room. What remains – the basement, the theatre, and the corpse.

There's a corpse in the basement. And why not? We always keep our dead in the basement, don't we?<sup>92</sup> The repressed/repressing parents of *Shockheaded Peter* stuffed their monstrous baby (who reeked of death) below the floorboards (see Chapter 1). The doctor/criminal genius in the *Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* brought Malvina's corpse to the grotto below his island to revive her (see Chapter 2). And then, there's Norman Bates. He would regularly take his taxidermied, mummified mother down to the basement as a kind of punishment. Ultimately, he left her there for Marion's sister to discover. But of course, Norman's mother lived a double life. After her death, she was a dried up, desiccated corpse, frequently occupying the cellar alongside the other preserves, but she was also Norman himself, in full costume and wig, wielding a knife through shower curtains. She was simultaneously a corpse and a performance. The discovery of her body coincided with the revelation of Norman's theatricality.

There's theatre in corpses. Like *Psycho*, *Sleep No More* revels in the uncanny overlap between death and theatricality. The evening explores the way in which death can perform. Products of taxidermy are displayed throughout the space – they “act” alive, and in so doing, they declare simultaneously the absence of that liveness. The plastic doll/stillborn child performs its dance of death in the orgy. Even Macduff's children act out their death in absentia. Death performs, but the performance is also a response to death. Norman takes on the “role” of mother after her death makes the part available (and necessary). In such a way, death becomes generative. It creates not only the performance, but also more death (literally as Norman's “mother” stabs Marion), so that death becomes a self-propagating cycle. Death

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<sup>92</sup> Bernice Murphy has identified a genre of American popular culture that she terms “the suburban gothic,” one which of course, shares much in common with the uncanny. In this genre, basements play an important role. Looking at a variety of examples from TV shows and films, she notes that “basements.... are invariably associated with murder, the concealment of terrible crimes and illicit burial” (155).

as theatre is productive, even reproductive. It is fitting that the corpse in the basement, then, be a mother. Death in *Sleep No More* is like the death of Macduff's own mother, which produces a child from deceased flesh.

The basement is a theatre, and also a womb. Or at least, such would be Freud's conclusion. *Sleep No More* is theatre as an inanimate womb – a womb of walls and objects rather than flesh and blood – but capable of bearing fruit, uncanny fruit. Here, what is dead gives birth to performance, and the performance, in turn, creates more death.

### **BODIES<sup>93</sup>**

I am standing in the long cobblestone corridor on the fourth floor, deciding where to go next. A hand presses lightly upon my shoulder. I wonder which of my friends has located me among the masked spectators, and turn to see. But I realize it is not a friend; it is not another spectator at all. A slight woman wearing crimson and velvet passes me. A dancer – no mask covers her delicate features. The hand on my shoulder was intended to shift me out of her way, which it effectively did. But that hand is the only contact she will have with me. Her eyes offer no acknowledgement of my existence, and her gaze continues past me, towards another dancer at the opposite end of the hall. I feel both manipulated and invisible – easily moved aside, equally easily ignored. Multiple times throughout the evening, I experience the touch of one of these dancers, so casual and careless. The intimacy of such contact is immediately betrayed by their seeming lack of awareness that contact had occurred. Despite

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<sup>93</sup> By including a section here on bodies, I am aware that I am equating the bodies in the production (including my own) with other spaces and objects. The production itself makes this connection between bodies and objects. The relationship is also a premise of phenomenology – that the body, while being a thing that we experience uniquely, is equally “not *opposed* to those [other] things either” (Hass 78). The body is the basis of spatiality, but it is also, itself, experienced spatially.

their ineluctable proximity, they seem impossibly distant from me. They have as much connection to my reality as ghosts, or memories.

The effect is paradoxical, considering that the athletic nature of their dances calls attention to their vitality, to their very physical presence as bodies. But these are bodies that seem to deny their very nature as such – their movement seems intended to try and distance their selves from physical reality.<sup>94</sup> The fight against the body is simultaneously a fight for (complete totalitarian) control of that body – a control that supersedes gravity, physics, even time.

Even while their bodies exert these fantastic pressures, they seem disconnected from their owners – a rupture that is registered (or not registered, really) by the lack of facial expression that would correspond to their pains. As though so much work were involved in the creation of these movements that none could be left over for self-consciousness. As though these bodies could experience things separately from the minds that own them. Or as though the intention that jerks the dancer's body into unexpected and unpredictable movements were not his own. And yet there are moments of intense expression – usually at times when the body goes still. The second Ms. De Winter sheds a tear; Lady Macbeth kisses her husband with a rabidly hungry mouth. Each such moment delivers a greater shock by virtue of its isolation. The emotions of the character and the movement of the body do not necessarily work in cooperation.

The dancers seem like puppets, or robots, or automatons: bodies conducted into motion by some unseen power. Not only their movements, even their emotional life seems

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<sup>94</sup> As Worthen notes, “The dance vocabulary is tense, the body apparently in constant struggle with itself, with gravity, perhaps with the weight of its own embodiment (or character)” (90). Worthen connects this tension between dancer and body with a struggle between actor and character. The latter struggle may indeed be implied, but it is articulated along purely physical lines.

automatic – summoned and presented on cue. Enhancing this sensation is the fact that every movement is repeated, not just for consecutive performances, but multiple times across one evening. They seem to be “animated” rather than inherently alive.

If these characters are alive (which clearly is debatable), then the spectators cannot be. Our existence is erased by the relentless progress of their narrative. This is what they communicate through their touch – that for them, I am not there. Throughout the night, I come increasingly to feel that I am actually the ghost in their reality – that their complete commitment to that reality allows no space for mine.

Not all contact between cast and audience is so dismissive. Numerous individuals are singled out for a “solo” performance, in which their presence is very much essential to the drama that is played out. I’ve heard the stories. My colleague, a costume designer, was taken by the hand and transported to a back room. The dancer, a young man with effeminate features, shut the door behind her, preventing any witnesses from following them inside. He sat her in front of a table, and pulled off her mask. She resisted, obedient to the rules of the production, but his eyes and manner convinced her that it was all right. They did not speak to each other for the entire encounter, which could not have lasted more than ten minutes. He sat in front of her with tears in his eyes, and handed her an object – lipstick. She had the sense he wanted to use it, and didn’t know how (fortunately she was skilled in such things). She applied it for him. Abruptly he stood and grabbed a handkerchief. He roughly rubbed the lipstick from his face, and then grabbed her hand, leaving the red-stained cloth inside it. He led her back to a main hallway and retreated into the room, closing the door again, this time between them. When she opened her hand, she found a wedding ring inside the handkerchief. She repositioned her mask on her face, keeping hanky and ring as personal souvenirs.

Most encounters go something like this. They are private, one-on-one exchanges. Despite the fact that both individuals play a part, the performance is not mutual – the performer knows how to behave, and the spectator must divine what is expected (for some this disparity of knowledge makes the encounter distressing). Many of these exchanges are silent, but some involve language. When the dancers do speak, though, it is to recite poetry or passages of Shakespearean text – a memorized speech, not an improvised conversation. Their responses are limited, and therefore, so are the experiences of the spectators. On two different occasions, I was able to spy on an encounter between the nurse and a spectator from the audience. Two different individuals, and quite possibly a different dancer as nurse (I couldn't tell), but the same event. The encounter on both occasions was nearly exactly the same. The nurse went through the same movements, recited the same speech for the second guest as she did for the first. Not surprisingly, both spectators responded in almost an identical fashion. The result is that the event is far more a replay than an improvisation.

My own personal encounter epitomizes this atmosphere of “re-creation.” On my second visit to *Sleep No More*, I was singled out for a personalized show, but it was not quite so private. A dancer, dressed like a bell-boy, found me in the hotel lobby. He took me by the hand and led me over to a small stage area. In front of the platform there was a single table, with a single chair beside. He sat me in it, his personal audience of one, then stepped up onto the stage. He took hold of the microphone there. An audio recording began to play. I recognized it immediately – a song I love called, “Is that All There Is?” recorded by PJ Harvey. The dancer then proceeded to lip-synch along, wrapping his lips around unvoiced words with uncanny precision. His performance was not an improvisation, but rather a recreation. He had done this many times before for other audience members, but from the very first time it had been a reperformance. An attempt, as thoroughly as possible, to recreate

the physicality of a recorded voice. A re-enactment – not of some live event, but of the record, the mere traces, of that live event.

These personal encounters are microcosms of *Sleep No More*'s overall recursive structure. Director Felix Barrett organized the production “in three repeat cycles so that you can choose to revisit incidents, or stumble across them again by chance” (quoted by Worthen 82). The repeatability of the performance is an essential component of the experience. The hyper-controlled movements are designed and rehearsed in order to be as identical to previous iterations as is humanly possible, or even more than humanly possible. What happens when a “live” event is repeated several times within the same performance? That repetition becomes a part of what is being performed. Susan Sontag notes how “[t]heatre cannot equal the cinema’s facilities for the strictly-controlled repetition of images” (30). True, of course. But *Sleep No More* certainly does everything in its power to try. The iterability that film would claim, this work of theatre *enacts*.

The individual encounters of *Sleep No More* are an integral part of their secret allure – the possibility to share in a unique moment, two living bodies creating a singular experience in time. But even here, when the production should be most “live,” the dancers of *Sleep No More* create something other than live presence. The spectators who participate become puppets of the performance, as programmed and predictable as the precisely rehearsed choreography, or the soundtrack. While perhaps not quite dead, they too, become something other than “live.” Like the dancers, they are ghosted, turned into memories rather than realities, in which they repeat (whether knowingly or not) scenes from a life that has already taken place. The production absorbs them into its preservation of the past.

## MASKS

*The best thing to happen in the theatre since the proscenium.*<sup>95</sup>

I am one of many – the legions of roaming spectators wandering through the halls. We are a group set apart by our faces, all concealed by the masks we were given as we entered the performance. Made of white plastic and vaguely carnivalesque, the mask covers the majority of the face. Its shape conforms to the normal contours of the head around the forehead, temple, cheekbones and the bridge of the nose. At that point, the plastic elongates well beyond the tip of one’s actual nose to conceal much of the mouth as well. The brow line protrudes significantly over the oversized eyeholes, casting a shadow over the sunken sockets. The darkness calls attention to the gaze of each spectator – these holes are the focal point of each mask. But simultaneously, the mask erases the actual eyes of each individual, replacing them instead with an apparent void, a twin pair of black holes, peering out from the white foundation. All the eyes that watch *Sleep No More* are the same – all the eyes are gone.

The mask seals me inside myself. In the supplemental guidebook of *Sleep No More*, director Felix Barrett describes their purpose: to “[establish] each individual as part of an audience, and create a boundary between them and the action... [The mask is] an important part of the dreamlike world we are trying to create” (Barrett and Doyle 24). Inside the mask, I am very aware of my own body. I smell my breath on the inside of the elongated nose, and feel dampness where the cheap plastic comes into contact with my skin. Occasionally, I find moments to subtly lift the mask from my face and breathe in some fresh air, but this only in furtive moments and dark corners. I worry that at the end of the performance, wisps of my hair will be stuck to my forehead from my own humidity, and wonder who I’ll be standing near when I remove the mask.

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<sup>95</sup> A twitter dialogue about *Sleep No More*, quoted in Worthen, 94.



But the mask also erases and negates my body. Barrett elaborates, “The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone” (Barrett and Doyle 24). The mask does not just make *others* into ghostly presences – it is not so selective in its effect. The mask makes *all spectators* into specters, including myself. Just as it evacuates the eyes of the spectator, it has a similar effect on the whole. It nullifies my individuality, making me the same as any other spectator. The effect is so powerful I do not recognize myself. Even further, the mask removes me from being of any consequence. It is the mask which gives the performers the authority to ignore me. By virtue of the mask, I disappear.

I think of a story I read as a teenager – I remember neither the name nor the author and it may have been of questionable literary value, but the premise haunts me still. A young man arrives in Venice for the carnival for the first time. An attractive woman approaches him and makes plans to meet him later. She is seductive. He has no costume, so she provides him with one. A mask, cape, gloves. She invites him to wear these tonight – she will be able to recognize him by the mask and attire. He puts them on, and is shocked to discover how completely they transform him. His awkward and gangly shape becomes elegant, even gentrified. His ruddy imperfect complexion is covered over entirely by the smooth white features of his mask and a pair of white gloves. He feels utterly transfigured – virile, powerful, not himself. He steps out into the crowd; he finds the woman again and spends the night with her. When the night ends, he begins to remove his costume. Beneath his gloves, he now finds...nothing. Behind the mask, he has disappeared. His only existence now is within the costume. The presence of the artificial mask created his actual absence.

Edgar Allan Poe describes a mask whose negative force works as powerfully outwards as inwards: *The Masque of the Red Death*. Despite the plague raging just outside the walls, guests

at the ball of Prospero revel in grotesque costumes and masks. At midnight, a new guest arrives, whose presence and attire contaminate the atmosphere and force all to recall the unpleasantness outside. His costume, a dark cloak and bloodstained mask, enacts the gruesome death the plague provides. Outraged by what he takes to be a personal offense, Prospero confronts this figure. He rips off the mask to reveal that there is nothing – no one – underneath it. He then dies. The plague has entered the castle, and will quickly spread its contagion to all his guests.

This mask is literally a performance of death, as are the masks of *Sleep No More*. The masks allow us to disappear from the performance, and therefore also permit us to be witnesses. The very act of spectatorship seems to make us dead – as Mrs. Danvers asks the new Mrs. De Winter: “Do you think the dead come back to watch the living?” The living do not see the dead, just as these dancers ignore our presence (with rare and also limited exceptions). It is the dead who are witnesses, the dead who watch. And as witnesses in a world we nonetheless inhabit, we are likewise ghosted, made inconsequential and invisible. We are spectral spectators, or spectating specters. The words become inseparable.

### **Part 3 – Conclusion: Filmic desire, theatrical embodiment**

Through this dream narrative, a pattern begins to emerge – the logic of *Sleep No More*'s unique spatiality and approach. What is the golden thread that has been pulling us through the labyrinth? This chapter, like the production itself, has been haunted by the presence of *film*. Film scores pump through concealed speakers, light and shadow alternate in the chiaroscuro of Hitchcock and Noir. This performative dream is in fact an embodiment of the phenomenology of film. To adopt the language of Freud (even if somewhat facetiously, for the

moment) – if *Sleep No More* is a dream, what is the subconscious wish that its dream logic conceals? *Sleep No More* is theatre that dreams it is film.

Throughout, there have been clues. The production’s illogical and fragmentary space is cinematic: from the very moment it opens a door and allows us through it, we begin to access the realm of film. Its hallways are manifestations of the transformations produced by cutting and editing between shots. The sensation of sentience granted to the space itself suggests the authority of a camera/editor who controls the spectators’ presence within that space. *Sleep No More*’s repetitions (and the hyper-controlled movements which make such repetition possible) aspire to the temporality of film. Even the masks make a significant contribution – limiting the range of our peripheral vision and restricting our sight within a very specific frame.

A dream of film, like so many dreams, originates as much in anxiety as desire. This particular anxiety should be familiar to theater practitioners and academics alike. Philip Auslander has written extensively about the pressures placed on live performance by our increasingly mediatized world. Though he focuses on the role of television, he considers the entire spectrum of the “mediatized,” which refers to anything that is “a product of the mass media or of media technology” including, of course, the realm of cinema (Auslander 4). His book *Liveness* demonstrates just how the evolution of such mediatized forms have complicated our beliefs about the status of the “live” in performance:

As the mediatized replaces the live within cultural economy, the live itself incorporates the mediatized, both technologically and epistemologically. The result of this implosion is that a seemingly secure opposition is now a site of anxiety. (Auslander 44)

This anxiety stems from doubt, from our sense that “liveness” and mediatization are not antagonistic, that the two states of being are not irreconcilable. They are increasingly intertwined, both in practice, when TV screens and projections interact with bodies on stage, or television cameras present a “live broadcast,” or we make use of the “Facebook live”

feature; and in theory, as the term “liveness” becomes increasingly difficult to navigate. The uncanny practice of *Sleep No More* teases and toys with this anxiety. It is never presented explicitly, but it lies like a sleeping cat under the bed.

According to Auslander, live performance has been negotiating and reforming its identity in response to the dominance of television and cinema. Theatre increasingly “incorporates” the mediatized – most often by interpolating its products (via projections or video) into the performance. In contrast to these practices, *Sleep No More’s* incorporation of film emerges as unique – more implicit, perhaps, but also more extensive. Film is not merely referenced, not merely a matter of images or clips; rather, its very atmosphere pervades and envelops the performance. The technology of film is absent; the sensation of film remains. *Sleep No More* “incorporates” film in a much more literal sense – it gives film corporeality. The performance is an embodiment of the two-dimensional medium.

Auslander argues, “[t]o put it bluntly, the general response of live performance has been to become as much like [the mediatized] as possible” (Auslander 7). This conception of the film-theatre interaction, blunt as he presents it to be, is simple and one-sided; film and the mediatized become a kind of ideal which theater and live performance can only (insufficiently) imitate. This kind of mimicry is *not* actually what *Sleep No More* is doing. Rather the production explodes and inverts this very paradigm, providing an experience of film through the methods and tools of theatre. Describing *Sleep No More* as a dream of film does not mean that it aspires to *be* film, but rather that it embodies a relationship both more subtle and complex. *Sleep No More* allows its patrons a dream of being *IN* a film – something that film itself can never do.

Since the invention of film, viewers have fantasized about being able to enter into the screen and walk around. Perhaps the most famous early example would be Buster Keaton in

*Sherlock Jr.*, but there have been countless instances in film history, varying from the sinister (Carrie-Ann being sucked into the afterlife through a television set) to the nostalgic (Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon transforming the black and white world of *Pleasantville* to technicolor). The reverse dream – of a film character or element escaping outwards from the screen – has an equally rich history, in films like *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. More often than not, this latter dream becomes a nightmare, as something demonic emerges through the screen (*The Ring*, or *Nightmare on Elm Street*).

The premise of *Sherlock Jr.* seems particularly relevant to *Sleep No More*. A young employee of a movie theatre – the projector operator – aspires to become a detective. After a botched attempt at detective work (he ends up being accused of the crime himself), he returns to the theatre exhausted, starts the film reel, and falls asleep. In his dream, he emerges from his body (which remains slumped behind the projector). His dream-self walks down to the theatre, passes through the audience, and climbs up to, then *INTO*, the screen. Keaton literally dreams his way into the film-scape. His motivation for entering the picture is to enter the narrative – he sees his girlfriend being seduced by another man, and tries to stop it. But as he enters the screen, the film cuts abruptly to a different location, and girlfriend and seducer are nowhere to be found.

Here follows a particularly thrilling sequence, in which Keaton becomes a pawn, a puppet even, of film phenomenology. To his torment and our delight, he is tossed about within film space and time like a dishtowel in a washing machine. Keaton remains more or less in the center of the frame as the film proceeds to cut every few seconds to a new and unexpected location. Just as he becomes aware of his current surroundings, they are replaced abruptly with new ones. He remains a consistent presence within each new shot, but the space around him constantly surprises and shocks, prompting a certain amount of slapstick. As he is about

to step onto a staircase, the steps disappear; as he is about to sit on a bench, it vanishes. He starts to walk away, and finds himself poised precariously at the edge of a cliff. The sequence goes on for over two minutes, far longer than the narrative requires, but long enough to appeal to our imagination, our obsession with what filmic immersion would look like.

Ultimately, the film seems to take mercy on him by finally fading to black (rather than making another cut). Keaton, for the first time since he transgressed the screen, disappears. The next time he appears, he has become a character within the film (the great detective Sherlock Jr.), but he seems to have earned that place by virtue of his earlier escapades.<sup>96</sup>

I am not alone in recognizing the cinematic atmosphere that suffuses *Sleep No More*. In his book, *Dark Matter*, Andrew Sofer makes a brief reference to the production, and describes the experience as “like walking into a movie – or a nightmare” (9). Reviewer Scott Brown likens the spectator’s journey to the sensation of “becoming the camera,” and in particular, the nearly omnipresent control of “puzzle-horror first person video games.” Such video games are themselves a response to the desire for immersion into an on-screen world. As such, they do share much in common with the experience of *Sleep No More*. But even the most authentic video games cannot provide the unique corporeality of being in *Sleep No More’s* twisted little world.

In 2012, the producers experimented with the possibility of an intersection between such online gaming experiences and the live encounter with the production. According to Peter Higgin, “we wanted to see if we could create an online experience which lived up to the

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<sup>96</sup> Lesley Stern also examines *Sherlock Jr.* in the context of her exploration into uncanny film, “I Think, Sebastian, Therefore... I Sommersault” (364). She declares Keaton’s interaction with the filmic space thoroughly (and delightfully) uncanny.

visceral intensity of the live show.<sup>97</sup> Working with MIT's media lab, they created an "augmented" experience for certain patrons, who would wear digitally enhanced versions of the masks. The masks accessed certain special technological "tricks" within the performance (typewriter keys that moved autonomously, a book that would fly off a shelf), but they also linked the spectator to an online "companion" experiencing the production as virtual reality.<sup>98</sup> While the experiment proved fascinating, the digital component has not developed into a regular aspect of the performance, possibly because of logistical challenges. Or, equally plausible, the online version simply did not live up to its aspirations, being so unlike the actual physical encounter. If the production's thrill comes from its ability to enter the world of film, mediating it through an online platform would necessarily obviate much of that significance. It would simply restore the very screen the performance works to transgress.

Though several have noted this significant relationship between film and the live performance, few have explored this interaction in depth, particularly for its significance as an embodied immersion. Examining this production in the context of uncanny theatre exposes the mechanisms of its unique cinematic spatiality. *Sleep No More* creates a film world using *only* the materials of theatre – light, sound, objects, bodies, matter. By capitalizing on the uncanny potential of these material elements, the production conjures and inhabits a far more intangible realm – the one we normally only spectate via a screen.

In a sense, all of these fantasies of entering the film-scape are but versions of Alice through the looking glass: the imagined world seen on the glass converted into a reality within

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<sup>97</sup> Peter Higgin, "Innovation in arts and culture #4."

<sup>98</sup> Koumarianos and Silver dedicate much of their article to the potential of this online platform, and how it might complicate the production's already ambiguous liminality. For additional information on how the digital version functioned for participants, see Dave Itzkoff, "A Guinea Pig's Night at the Theater", or Peter Higgin, "Innovation in arts and culture #4."

the glass, complete and extended in space and time, if we could only but access it. Film as looking glass – it is not an unfamiliar position. Christian Metz has famously argued that film produces the same effect on spectators as Lacan’s psychological mirror does on the infant, i.e. the process of identification and the formation of the self. Metz arrives at this claim, significantly, by considering film itself as a dream, and seeking to understand its code (to decode the “cinematic signifier”) through psychoanalysis.

Metz’ analysis of film itself as a dream is revelatory for understanding this particular dream – Keaton’s dream, Alice’s dream, the dream of *Sleep No More* and its patrons. He notes one important distinction between film and the mirror of developmental psychology:

Thus film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body. In a certain emplacement, the mirror suddenly becomes clear glass. (Metz 45)

“In a certain emplacement” – the language is reminiscent of how viewers engage with the unholy mirrors of the production, particularly in the children’s bedroom. The mirrors of *Sleep No More* perform the work of the production in microcosm – they complicate our sense of presence, allowing us to simultaneously be there and not there. As regards the self, the film mirror becomes glass. We cannot see ourselves there. Our absence is an essential part of this particular mirror – but it is actually a requirement of any mirror that we seek to transgress. We cannot be there AS reflection, or how would we access it as the self? Neil Gaiman’s recent book *Coraline* (also an animated film and a musical) conveys this requirement well. In his gothic version of a looking glass adventure, Coraline, a contemporary Alice, enters an alternate realm through a door/hallway/portal rather than a mirror, but the world she encounters is still an uncanny reflection of her own. All the characters from her real world are present in this mirror realm – there is an “other mother” and an “other father.” The word



“other” performs the task of the mirror, identifying each of these figures as a reflection of a “real” figure on the other side. But of course, there is no “other Coraline.” She is herself in both realms. If there were an “other Coraline” here then the real Coraline could not be.

The absence of the spectator in the cinematic mirror is even more indispensable. If we existed as a part of the film, it would not be film; for us, it would be life. Cinematic presentations of this desire always fall into this trap – when Keaton or Maguire attempt to “enter” the film world, they only succeed in becoming an actual part of the film. They do not transgress the screen at all – they only shift it. The dream is made all the more poignant by its absolute futility. To be in a film is a phenomenological impossibility – as impossible as it would be to stand on the other side of the mirror. Of course, we can all have the experience of being a part of a film or TV show in the practical sense. We can imagine what that would be like – to get cast as an extra in some movie, to spend hours getting into hair, make-up and costume, to then stand on some soundstage under the hot lights, while camera men and assistant directors bark at each other. Thrilling, but in no way a satisfaction of the real desire. *Sleep No More* is as much a product of film’s anxiety as it is of theatre’s. Film cannot answer the desire it has itself produced, and theatre, perhaps, can.

Filmic immersion is fundamentally a paradox. In order to be a film, the experience must provide a spectator’s separation from what we see, but in order to enter the film, it must also surround us. We must be absently present, or presently absent; we must exist and simultaneously erase our existence. It is impossible for film to achieve both these goals at once. But the presence of absence (and its opposite) is exactly what *Sleep No More* does –

through its masks and through its mirrors, through its endless appeal to the realm of the dead, through its inherently uncanny practice.<sup>99</sup>

Rather than valuing theatre for some singular access to the live (which as Auslander argues, is increasingly an untenable position), many theorists have come to celebrate the opposite – theatre’s ability to portray or evoke death. Rebecca Schneider, in her remarkable book *Performing Remains*, makes just such a claim. She considers the practice of reenactment and the way in which present performances can channel past events. In so doing, she “troubles the prevalence of presentism, immediacy, and linear time in most thinking about live performance” (Schneider 6). She considers how reenactment complicates our belief in the past as dead and in death as a fixed and unreachable condition. She proposes a “more porous approach to time and to art” (Schneider 6).

*Sleep No More* channels all the anxieties and possibilities of a “reenactment,” but it is a reenactment of an event that has never happened (or is always happening). It recreates no existing film or performance, but it is nevertheless suffused with a sense of déjà vu. Drawing on examples of reenactment from the Wooster Group and others, Schneider calls attention to the “labor” of recreation, and the importance of seeing it as such. In *Sleep No More* as in Schneider’s examples, “what appears is very *hard work*” (Schneider 16). Schneider, referring to the Wooster Group’s presentation of *Poor Theatre*, calls the performance “uncannily precise” (Schneider 16). The same term applies to the work of *Sleep No More*. Precision becomes uncanny when it seems unnatural – when it refutes the progression of time itself, when it suggests that exact repetition is possible. The concentration and precision of the dancers in *Sleep No More* suggest such repetition. Each tap of a finger, each inhalation, each shift of the

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<sup>99</sup> As Andrew Sofer notes, “the ontologically dislocating effect of such immersive performance art [renders us] somehow more shadowy and insubstantial than the vivid performers” (9).

eye is studiously executed in such a way as to be accurately recreated again in the future. Even in a single iteration, their focus calls attention to the act as recurring, an event which looks forward and back. Every performance happens again, not just night after night, but within one showing, such that repetition itself becomes the objective.

For the Wooster Group, the simultaneity of film and stage performance creates the profoundly disorienting sensation:

Actors deliver uncannily precise scenes together with the filmic document in a queasy reiteration in which the live actors appear ghost-like and the filmic actors appear oddly reenlivened *across* the undecidable interstices of their cross-temporal mimesis. (Schneider 16)

In *Sleep No More* there is no filmic document present. Instead the entire production seems to be an *interactive* filmic document, but the repetition is equally unsettling, equally uncanny.

Schneider's book "explore[s] the theatrical claim lodged in the logic of reenactment that the past is not (entirely) dead, that it can be accessed *live*" (Schneider 17). Replace the word "past" with "film" and I argue that is exactly what *Sleep No More* achieves. Rather than presenting life, the theatre of reenactment uses liveness to present the "dead" past. To the extent that film is dead, *Sleep No More* allows us to access it as live, through theatrical performance.

Here emerges the radical assertion – the idea that theatre can present the experience of film on a level beyond what film itself achieves. And, equally importantly, without being any less a product of theatre. W. B. Worthen argues, "In its 'immersive' dimension, *Sleep No More* allegorizes the illusory immediacy of theatre, emphasizing not its transparent accommodation to the real, but something else: the material density and opacity of its performance" (91). This is the final point in Worthen's argument that *Sleep No More* is a most theatrical theatre, even to the point of becoming its own allegory. And it is – it is precisely the "material density and

opacity” of theatre that allows it to be our access point into film. *Sleep No More* produces its fantasy of cinematic immersion by virtue of entirely theatrical methods. Film is suffused so thoroughly throughout the production that it becomes a homogenous component of the performance, so intermingled and pervasive that it can go undetected.<sup>100</sup> Theatre’s opacity allows *Sleep No More* to create a filmic relationship *within* space, to create instantly and everywhere an invisible but impermeable mirror, one which erases rather than reflects. By virtue of this mirror, we are able to inhabit and spectate simultaneously. We can walk around the film-scape, and yet we are not there. We can touch our environment, taste the candy, and leave it as though we had never been there at all. We thus fulfill the dream of Buster Keaton and also the nightmare of Carrie-Ann.

And that particular nightmare is appropriate as well. Carrie-Ann was sucked through the flickering flatness of her television screen into nothing less than the afterlife itself. *Poltergeist* offers an exaggeration of our fear of the mediated by suggesting that the products of our technology are not just something other than live – that they are dead, even sinisterly so. We easily equate cinema with the past – there is a “pastness” inherent in its very nature, in its ability to present now that which has come before. But we can further slide from equating film with the realm of the past to equating it with the realm of the dead. Sontag argues that cinema haunts itself: “this youngest of the arts is also the one most heavily burdened with memory. Cinema is a time machine. Movies preserve the past... Movies resurrect the beautiful dead...” (Sontag 32). If movies “resurrect” the dead, they do so at a distance. *Sleep No More* resurrects the dead, and lets us walk among them.

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<sup>100</sup> In contrast to my observation in Chapter 2 that film is (in general – the films of the Quay Brothers being an exception) the great equalizing medium, here it is theatre that becomes the tyrannical art form, the one capable of absorbing other media into its mix.

*Sleep No More's* fantasy powerfully suggests that theatre can be something other than live, and it hints at still darker possibilities. The production animates the inanimate, and converts presence into absence. It honors its corpses and disregards the living. It generates death, which regenerates in turn. *Sleep No More* utilizes the language of death to portray film, but the opposite process is also true – in order to interact with the phenomenology of film, we must explore the realm of the inanimate. The production inhabits the liminal space between film and theatre – the uncanny landscape of the living dead. Enter at your own risk.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Remember Dying? – Space, Memory, and Death in the

### Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor

Now then, here, on this stage,  
The end of the world,  
After a disaster,  
A heap of dead bodies (there were many of them)  
And a heap of broken Objects – this is all that is left.  
Then –  
According to the principles of my theatre –  
The dead ‘come alive’  
And play their parts  
As if nothing happened.

Tadeusz Kantor (on his production of *Ô douce nuit – Silent Night*, FON 436) <sup>101</sup>

To admit death. . . to know now what you knew but were denied consciousness of...that all is  
predicated on death...

Howard Barker: *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*

#### Prelude: Kantor, Posthumously

The final production of Tadeusz Kantor’s career of inexhaustible creativity was a self-referential work entitled *Today is my Birthday*. It premiered in Toulouse on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1991. On that day, Kantor took the stage along with the rest of his theatre company, Cricot 2. Under other circumstances, his participation in the theatrical experience would not have been noteworthy. More than just the head of Cricot 2, Kantor was its demiurge, functioning as director, artist, visionary, and architect. He maintained his singular control during the

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<sup>101</sup> Michal Kobialka is the most prolific and well-known Kantor scholar in English. He has authored numerous essays, articles and books on his subject, and has also translated and gathered together much of Kantor’s own extensive writings. I cite frequently from his book, *Further On, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre*, and use the abbreviation FON for convenience and to avoid confusion with other sources by Kobialka also cited here. In this comprehensive book, Kobialka intersperses large passages of Kantor’s writing with his own responses and commentary (to the extent that sometimes his voice begins to resemble that of the artist). It may be assumed that I am quoting from Kantor’s own work (as translated by Kobialka) unless I directly specify otherwise.

performances themselves, interfering with the action and making alterations to his productions as they were being presented. For those familiar with this aspect of his practice, encountering Kantor on stage at the premiere of *Today is My Birthday* would not have been surprising. What made his presence remarkable at this particular premiere, however, was the fact that Kantor had passed away one month earlier.

Kantor was not and never had been an “actor” in his own productions in the conventional sense, but he was nevertheless an absolutely critical component of the live performance. In the latter half of his theatrical career, his work became intensely personal. If not exactly autobiographical, his productions were so enmeshed with his own identity that they verged on solipsistic. Being present physically during the performances allowed him to extend this introspective purpose. Initially, he was a kind of mute stage manager or puppeteer, exerting objective control over the activity with inscrutable gestures and facial expressions. Though he gradually became more involved in the action, he later reversed that trend and became passive – a mute witness offering silent but palpable affirmation or condemnation of the action before him.

Towards the end, mere physical presence ceased to satisfy him, and he sought to incorporate himself more profoundly into his productions. He felt the truth of his identity was not conveyed properly by a body in a single time and space. Rather he argued for the fundamental “multiplicity” of the self:

I... I am made up of numberless ranks of characters... A whole crowd walking into the depths of time... They are all *me*... What an extraordinary richness... I can feel the hand of invisible TIME, the cause of this richness, which nevertheless, simultaneously, mercilessly and ruthlessly, deprives me of this multiplicity, this abundance, these profiles, silhouettes, varieties, which impoverishes me into one figure, the present one...<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Kantor, quoted in Pleśniarowicz 251-252.

The “present” self, for Kantor, the body-living-in-this-moment, was but one version, the poorest version, of his true identity. In his production, *Let the Artists Die*, he presented at the very least four distinct versions of himself. In part these versions were created by the force of time, as he describes above – he included “MYSELF, a real figure, the main perpetrator of all of this” alongside, “MYSELF - AT THE AGE OF SIX” and “MYSELF - DYING.” Each of these selves was portrayed by a different actor, converting the progress of time into simultaneously present flesh. Kantor also included a version of himself as “the AUTHOR, a stage character, dying, embodying a description of himself and his own death.”<sup>103</sup> By dividing “MYSELF” from “MYSELF dying” from “the AUTHOR, dying, embodying a description of himself” Kantor set up an eternally recursive process. The self could ceaselessly replace and regenerate through the act of “embodiment.” Kantor as himself dying becomes Kantor as author becomes Kantor as himself, on and on without end.<sup>104</sup> The very fact that Kantor could connect “dying” to “embodying” reveals a unique understanding of death. Death for Kantor was not an end, but rather an organic, developing, ongoing experience, in its own way as productive as life. This conception of death (or to be more accurate ‘dying’ – an evolving process, rather than a single event) is essential to understanding Kantor’s presence on stage in Toulouse, as well as the unique potency of all his theatre.

By the time that *Today is my Birthday* premiered, Kantor had integrated himself into the production in a variety of forms. He was there as a disembodied voice, articulating a prerecorded script over a loudspeaker. He was a “double” of himself portrayed by an actor wearing the simple suit and scarf that Kantor normally used during performances. Perhaps

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Pleśniarowicz 251-252.

<sup>104</sup> As Polish critic Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz notes, the fact that the actors playing “MYSELF dying” and “the AUTHOR” were actual twins, an identical duo who had long participated in the work of Cricot 2, reinforced the inherently repetitive self-reflection.



most potently, an empty chair marked the place where Kantor himself would have sat, had he been alive. All of these devices had already been built into the performance before Kantor's death. Kantor's physical body on stage would have been but one more iteration of himself within this theatrical hall of mirrors. When the production premiered, that body had already begun decomposing in a cemetery in Kraków, but Kantor was nevertheless on stage in Toulouse. Through the techniques he established while alive, it became easy, essential even, for him to maintain a presence after death. It was, in fact, the perfect culmination of Kantor's mission – a life dedicated to conveying death on stage.

In *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*, Alice Rayner pursues a phenomenological exploration of theatre's spirit life. She is particularly drawn to Kantor's empty chair in *Today is My Birthday* for its poignant evocation of a ghost onstage. She notes that Kantor's presence was always a form of ghosting, even when he was alive: "Kantor's work makes unique points of connection between the real and its doubles. His customary appearance onstage was a ghosting of the theatrical by the real" (Rayner 132). She then continues "If Kantor, while alive, always prowled the stage as a ghost, this production of *Today Is My Birthday* after Kantor's death brought him back as a living presence in which the chair gave a palpable place for memory to seat him" (Rayner 131). Rayner dedicates an entire chapter of her book to the potency of "Empty Chairs," noting the many ways such a chair can make "an absent body present" (130).<sup>105</sup> This particular chair – an inanimate object – became entirely suffused with Kantor's spirit life. As such, the chair encapsulated the work of all his theatre, a career "consistently concerned with the presence of death in life" (132).

She argues that in fact, Kantor's unique theatrical approach made it difficult to portray his actual disappearance – that in order for his death to become an affective presence for the

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<sup>105</sup> "An empty chair is always available for a ghost" (Rayner 133).

audience, his absence needed to be presented twice over – needed to be re-presented. She claims that this only occurred when the actor double, called the “self-portrait” was removed from the stage. She cites the emotional response of Kantor scholar and audience member, Michal Kobialka:

In Act V, three Russian soldiers pulled the Self-portrait from the frame of his “painting,” his space of art, and into the death chamber (the central frame). The floor between the frame and the backdrop was raised in such a manner as to resemble the gates leading to an open grave... When the Self-portrait left the stage, the vortex created by his absence was overwhelming. The chair within his frame, the chair at the table, and the central frame were empty. A split second was needed to recognize the image, but the emotion raised by it stayed much longer... in memory. (*JTOS* 383, quoted in Rayner 131)<sup>106</sup>

This stage was so thoroughly infused with Kantor’s presence that, even after his death, great effort was required to remove him, to make his absence emotionally resonant. Three distinct spaces had to be vacated to negate the power of his invisible spirit.

Tadeusz Kantor spent his life creating a theatre so entirely suffused with the presence of death that it made possible this performance by an actual ghost. The release of this ghost may have marked his theatre’s end, but, like Kantor himself, its uncanny discoveries persist, reappear, and return. For this reason, I choose to revisit Kantor’s work now, at the end of my dissertation, despite the fact that his work predates the other performances and artists I consider. Just as in his final production, Kantor’s spirit has been present throughout this investigation, though that becomes most evident in retrospect. The work of the previous three

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<sup>106</sup> Kobialka is himself ghosting Kantor with this description. The sentence “A split second was needed to recognize the image, but the emotion raised by it stayed much longer... in memory” is a reproduction of Kantor’s own words, from a description of one of his earliest productions. Kobialka is undoubtedly intentionally speaking with Kantor’s own voice here – it is a form of keeping Kantor’s ghost alive while also paying tribute to the very theatrical techniques in question. Note: I use the abbreviation **JTOS** to refer to *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, the collection of Kantor’s essays edited by Kobialka, which also includes two critical responses from Kobialka.

chapters provides the context to properly attend now to his voice, and recognize its undead echo reverberating through time.

An acknowledged genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, Kantor has been appreciated for his singularity, his ability to draw inspiration from various trends in performance and art and literature to create a theatrical practice uniquely his own. Attempts to classify his work have labeled it at times “memory theatre” or a “theatre of objects.” It is both of these, and more – perhaps, considering the empty chair of *Today is my Birthday*, calling it a “theatre of memory objects” comes a bit closer. When his approach is considered as a whole, the word that best integrates his multifaceted approach is *uncanny*. As much a theorist of the theatre as he was a practitioner, Kantor wrote extensively about his methods, but his theories have rarely been used to understand anything other than his own work. I argue that Kantor has a significant role to play as *the* theorist of the theatrical uncanny. Any work of uncanny performance, whether or not its creators acknowledge or are even aware of this legacy, could equally well be referred to by the adjective Kantorian. Furthermore, his ideas, as well as the productions themselves, deserve a place in the intellectual history of the uncanny itself. In the preceding chapters, I identify two diverging approaches to the uncanny phenomenon – either as a visceral engagement with the world, or as a mental construct, a puzzle for analysis.

Kantor’s work aligns primarily with the first trajectory, but also proves capable of reconciling these two disparate perspectives.

### **Kantor’s *Theatre of Death***

Kantor began his professional life as an artist and throughout his theatrical career continued to paint and sculpt and create installations. He turned to theatre in order to express what he could not accomplish in the visual arts. For this reason, he took an investigative approach to creating theatre, attempting to understand its unique capabilities and to maximize

its affective potential. He wrote numerous theatrical manifestos about what the theatre can and should be, and dedicated his company, Cricot 2, to the implementation of his ideas.<sup>107</sup> The creation of actual productions was but a consequence of his primary goal:

Cricot 2 Theatre does not function on regular basis...

The need to put a production together is dictated by an urgency to express an idea, which is processed for a long time, then slowly matures, and finally, demands and is ready to be materialized.

Each time this happens, it has a form of a creative explosion.

This is why this does not happen often. (FON 111)

For over 20 years, Kantor constantly reinvented himself, his work, and theatre itself. Every few years, he would crystallize his thoughts into a new doctrine of theatre practice. He gave each of his new approaches a title: “*Annexing Reality*,” “*The Zero Theatre*,” “*The Impossible Theatre*,” etc., and the method’s maturation would be marked with a corresponding production. Once completed, he would begin the process again. But in the late 1960s, this cycle of perpetual innovation came at last to rest. At this point, Kantor discovered his final form of theatre: ‘*The Theatre of Death*.’ In it, he articulated the philosophy and purpose that would govern all future productions of Cricot 2, for its remaining 25 years. It was as though, in the *Theatre of Death*, Kantor discovered what he had been looking for all along.

And, finally,  
the last “discovery.”  
The theatre  
Of DEATH  
(Year 1967).  
And it is here that a new  
Chapter  
Begins. (FON 195)

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<sup>107</sup> The Cricot 2 Theatre was founded in 1955: “The name and pedigree of the theatre reached back to the pre-war Cricot Artists’ Theatre (1933-1939)... The name ‘Cricot’ is a French-sounding anagram (read backwards) of the Polish phrase ‘*to cyrk*’ – ‘it’s a circus.’... Kantor quickly became the dominant figure in what had been planned as a collective effort by painters, actors, musicians, and poets” (Pleśniarowicz 69).

Kantor felt he had achieved both the ultimate innovation, and a return to theatre's earliest roots. In 1975, he wrote:

IT IS NECESSARY TO RECOVER THE PRIMEVAL FORCE OF THE SHOCK TAKING PLACE AT THE MOMENT WHEN, OPPOSITE A HUMAN (A SPECTATOR), THERE STOOD FOR THE FIRST TIME A HUMAN (AN ACTOR), DECEPTIVELY SIMILAR TO US, YET AT THE SAME TIME INFINITELY FOREIGN, BEYOND THE IMPASSABLE BARRIER. (FON 237)

Kantor believed that this essential barrier between spectator and spectated had been eroded and devalued in the commercial theatre around him, making theatre itself impotent. He longed to restore the potency of that border, to establish a truly impenetrable plane. But the traditional methods theatre offered for this – proscenium, pit, curtain – had become ineffective by their conventionality. They had lost their ability to “shock.” Kantor needed to confront the audience with an undeniable divider. To him, the only remaining impassable barrier was

Death:

let us establish then the limits of that boundary, which has the name of  
THE CONDITION OF DEATH,  
For it represents the most extreme point of reference  
No longer threatened by the conformity of  
the CONDITION OF AN ARTIST AND ART.

...this specific relationship,  
which is terrifying  
and at the same time compelling,  
this relationship of the living to the dead... (FON 237)

Kantor's *Theatre of Death* equated the division between spectators and performance with the separation of the living from the dead. On one side sat the living audience. Everything that took place on the other side, animate actors, inanimate props, even Kantor himself when he would occupy the stage space, fell into the category of the dead. The uneasy response his performance generated was the result of seeing this dead realm in action – not unlike the

repulsive fascination inspired by puppets, automatons, and even zombies – the very essence of the uncanny in performance.

Kantor defined this theatre by virtue of a specific spatial designation. The most important element – the infinite boundary – represented the climax of Kantor’s inquiry into the workings of space and matter, an obsession of his from the beginning of his theatrical practice. In his first method, which he called “Annexing Reality,” Kantor took his productions outside of the theatre building and off the stage into spaces with their own meanings and purposes. The corresponding performance to this technique, *The Return of Odysseus*, was performed in a bombed out room ravaged and stained by the Second World War.<sup>108</sup> This decision might seem like a rejection of the very boundary Kantor would later declare necessary for his *Theatre of Death*, but what Kantor was rejecting was not the division between spectator and spectacle, but rather, the artificial and impotent division imposed by the conventional theatre.<sup>109</sup>

The term “Annexing Reality” demonstrates Kantor’s commitment to replace comfortable illusion with the harshness of reality itself. The integration of performance and

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<sup>108</sup> The play, *The Return of Odysseus*, by Polish playwright and artist Stanisław Wyspiański is a retelling of the last portion of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus returns to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Wyspiański’s version emphasizes Odysseus’ guilt, and ends with him throwing himself off a cliff. The 1944 production marks one of the last times Kantor would create a performance that so directly enacted a play-text. In the years that followed, he would increasingly abstract, fragment and distort the plays he worked with, if not abandon the need for such a text altogether. Even in this production however, Kantor’s immersion of the performance in the actual reality of Nazi occupied Poland transformed the text. He wrote that “Odysseus refused categorically to be only an image” (FON 41). In this real room, it was necessary that he become a real soldier returning from this very real war.

<sup>109</sup> Of course, it must also be acknowledged that the decision to move outside the theatre was in part, a necessity. *The Return of Odysseus* was created in 1944, during the Nazi occupation, so the only place to perform such seditious work was in secret. But for Kantor, the practical consideration (though a matter of life and death) was soon overshadowed by the aesthetic and philosophical contribution gained by performing in this “real” space.

real life is of course suggestive of another theatrical innovation – the “Happening.” Taking place in 1944, *The Return of Odysseus* actually preceded the time period of the Happening, at least as it most often understood as the movement led by Allan Kaprow in the late 1950’s and 1960’s. During a trip to the US in 1965, Kantor would in fact meet Kaprow and discover his Happenings in person and recognize their connection to his own practice.<sup>110</sup> After this encounter, he would go on to stage several more overt “Happenings” of his own, but he also began to use the term retroactively to describe his earlier productions (**JTOS 233**). Kaprow’s main goal in the Happening was that “the line between the Happening and daily life should be kept as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible” (Kaprow 62), an idea which clearly cohered with Kantor’s concept of Annexing Reality.

While initially inspired by Kaprow’s work and experimenting with several “Happenings” of his own, Kantor eventually felt the need to move in a different direction. He was skeptical of any theatrical doctrine not of his own invention, especially so as it became more broadly accepted. Kantor began to speak of the Happening as “almost a museum piece” and “impotent” (**JTOS 90**).<sup>111</sup> What Kantor began to resist most about the Happening was the coherence it established between performance and audience. He felt the need to establish action in “two directions: towards the actors and towards the audience” (**JTOS 100**).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “Kantor brought the term ‘happening’ and, as he said, ‘the whole mythology of that phenomenon’ back from the United States. But not the method, for the definition of happening could in fact be applied to what he had already been doing” (Pleśniarowicz 98).

<sup>111</sup> Such critiques did not seem to disturb Kaprow or other creators of Happenings. Kaprow noted in 1966 that “The end of the Happenings has been announced regularly since 1958” and yet they kept happening (59). Part of the power of these events was actually their resistance to commoditization and popularization; so the more public attention tried to condemn the activity, the more meaningful it could be for the select few who would participate. See Kaprow 59-65.

<sup>112</sup> Though he did not overtly say so, I suspect that Kantor’s frustration with the “happening” also stemmed from its limitations with regards to time and space. In any theatrical

Even before he made the conscious decision to move away from the Happening as a method, Kantor's use of reality was distinct, in a way that laid the groundwork for *the Theatre of Death*. *The Return of Odysseus* confronted the audience with something inextricable from their own reality, something inherently "similar." But similar was decidedly not equal: there was still and already a certain distance – that of the drama of Odysseus, playing out within this space. Though he aggressively engaged with "reality" in this production, the performance was still divided from that reality. It was the same, but different – "deceptively similar." He was already negotiating the tension between familiar and foreign that would become essential in his Theatre of Death.

Kantor's "last discovery," was as much the recognition of what tied all of his previous theories together as a discovery in and of itself. Looking back to *The Return of Odysseus* he noted:

The return of Odysseus established a precedent and a prototype for all the later characters of my theatre. There were many of them. The whole procession that came out many productions and dramas – from the realm of FICTION. All were "dead," all were returning in to the world of the living, into our world, into the present. This contradiction of death-life perfectly corresponded to the opposition between fiction-reality. (FON 350)

Kantor appreciated tension and dissonance in all things. Each side of the paradox was dependent upon the other – death can only be understood through life, fiction only presented through reality. The Happening, which Kaprow once described as "Doing life, consciously"

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performance, there are at least two temporalities at work – the real time of the audience, and the show time of the performance. Kantor manipulated space to overlay even more forms of time into his productions – he made time submit to his unique spatiality. In creating the various doubles of *Today is My Birthday*, Kantor expressed his sense that present time "impoverishes" the full complexity of a self. By conflating the audience with the performance, Happenings reduce the temporal potential of theatre to a single time, the present. ("Whatever is to happen should do so in its natural time" Kaprow 63). Happenings become, to a certain extent, an art form ruled by time. Kantor's theatre served a different master – the rule of space.



(195), provided only one side of this necessary duality. Kantor's own Theatre could never be complete without the opposing presence of *death*.

Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, director of the Cricoteka and author of the first full-length book on Kantor's Theatre of Death writes, "For Kantor, the stage – that Realm of Fiction – turned out long before the definition of the Theatre of Death to be a country of the dead" (Pleśniarowicz 43). It was this affinity for the dead that created the powerful uncanny response in his theatre. Kantor's necromania manifested in several interconnected techniques, which can be observed as the primary methods of uncanny performance. He brought past and present into dialectical tension in a single complex space. He created an unusually symbiotic treatment of bodies and objects on stage, most overtly expressed in his use of the figure of the mannequin (the quintessential body-object). All these methods can best be understood as in service to his unique conception of memory: a process of spatialization by which Kantor revealed memory's physical presence, in things, in our bodies, in the space all around us. His Theatre of Death was at all times an engagement with living memory, played out in the self-aware sentient space of the stage.

### **Reviving *The Dead Class* – An approach**

The first production of Kantor's "Theater of Death" was *The Dead Class*. This iconic production can still be experienced through recordings and film versions, images, countless descriptions, and Kantor's own extensive writings about it, both during its creation and in his reflections that came after. By gathering together these vestigial traces, each spectator today must reconstruct their own version of the original – an appropriate act of resuscitation. Though any act analysis of a non-current production will require a similar method, Kantor made a point of preparing his work for just such future acts of reconstruction. Recognizing

the impossibility of accurately preserving the production as it was viewed live, he opted for a variety of alternate methods of preservation. He had his productions filmed and photographed, wrote about them extensively himself, and held on to many of the key objects and materials. He even founded a center for the preservation of his work, called Cricoteka, in Kraków in 1980, to function as a “Living archives.”<sup>113</sup> He fully intended for his productions to metamorphose from the original performances into this alternate form of existence.

Below, I offer a version of my own re-creation, drawn primarily from the film recording made in 1976 by Andrejz Wajda, supplemented with clips available on the internet (mostly taken from a performance in 1989 at the Théâtre National de Chaillot). These two performances are further enhanced by Kantor’s own writing, the 1991 documentary film, *The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor*, and descriptions by audience members including Kantor’s two main investigators, Kobialka and Pleśniarowicz. From these various sources, I distill a singular version, and describe it in a series of vignettes offered below. To a certain extent, I treat these fragments of the *Dead Class* as objects themselves, shards of an experience that cannot authentically be re-presented, but that retain a certain inherent integrity nevertheless. This method is part of my argument – that however suggestive or informative the theory of the production may be, the performance is also capable of speaking for itself. The excerpts included are linked to the ideas I develop in tandem, but they should not be viewed as straightforward examples. Rather, these snippets of the performance make their own assertions, and question as much as they support the ideas moving forwards. These fragments are neither strictly chronological, nor comprehensive, but that does not prevent their effective portrayal of the production as an experience. In fact, a single chronology would not reflect Kantor’s unique appreciation for the fluidity of time. His temporality was many things –

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<sup>113</sup> [www.cricoteka.pl](http://www.cricoteka.pl)

cyclical, horizontal, recursive, but a simple forward progression perhaps least of all. Instead I draw these episodes together architecturally, symbiotically, in relation to the ideas that they inspire. The very movement into and out of the recalled space of the production is itself a tribute to the mechanism of Kantor's unusual spatiality.

Kantor envisioned *The Dead Class* as a schoolroom inhabited not by ordinary students, but by their ghosts. It was not a play, not in any recognizable sense. More accurately, it was a place – a “desolate and forgotten storage-room” of childhood (FON 243) marked in and through time. The inhabitants of this room, the ‘students’, hovered in some liminal temporal realm on the very threshold of death. They are simultaneously ancient and young, dead and dying. They struggle to reinhabit the space of their memory, engaging in a series of scenes and rituals, cycles and repetitive actions. This fruitless and futile effort is in fact its own fulfillment. Even as it performs resurrection, the production enacts the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life.

### ***The Dead Class* – A room, alive**

*First there is the room – a ruin of a classroom, really a corner of a room, separated off from the larger space on two sides by worn and weathered ropes. The rope designates a limit, a boundary for both the audience and the performers. It keeps the audience out, but equally, it keeps the performers within. The sort of existence owned by those on one side of the rope is not the same as those on the other.*

*Five wooden pews – the students' desks – form a kind of nucleus. The wood is old, older than the desks themselves. Any scribbles that their former occupants may have carved into the surface now merge with the grooves and pockmarks of time, like ripples reverberating through water but inexplicably flash frozen. At the front of the classroom is a lectern/latrine. A simple box, enclosed on three sides, but open at the back. It serves occasionally as a pulpit, but more often as the classroom's lavatory.*

*The room already has three occupants. Kantor leans against the lectern/latrine, hiding his face with his hand, appearing already somewhat exhausted by the performance that has barely begun. Just behind the latrine and partially obscured by it, an androgynous figure in a long black dress and dumpy heels stands motionless, facing away from the audience. The cleaning woman.<sup>114</sup> On the opposite side of the classroom, a*

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<sup>114</sup> Kantor frequently ignored gender, age and appearance when casting, and often selected his actors before he knew the roles they would be playing. The kind of actor was more important than any resemblance to a particular character. In fact, the tension created by a

man is seated with a moldy newspaper in his lap. He is likewise completely still. It is unclear if either of these figures is actually alive. There is something false about the way the man holds his paper – under his hands, rather than in them, that suggests that he, at least, is not human. Perhaps she is not either.

In the corner closest to the audience, moldy and rotting books are piled in a heap. They are damp and floppy, heavy with the weight of long passages of time.

This room and its props are the descendants of one of Kantor's earliest "discoveries": the importance of the "poor object." Related to his manifesto on "Annexing Reality," this discovery was also about valuing reality over representation. Kantor chose to reject "artistic" objects – props – and to replace these with "The real object wrenched from reality" (FON 113). The act of replacing the art object with the undeniably real initially seems to be derivative of Dada, which likewise valorized ordinary everyday objects: it summons memories of Duchamp's *Fountain* – a urinal signed and displayed as art. Kantor had great respect for Dada's innovation and refusal of convention. But he claimed to have come into contact with Dada belatedly, in the 1960's, and only then to have recognized a "similar pattern of artistic 'conduct'" in his own work (JTOS 258). He saw in Dada a like-minded spirit of revolt and protest: "I realized that my protest of 1944 was the protest of Dada in 1914," but with one important distinction: Kantor's approach "contained... a dose of LYRICAL tone and (heaven forbid!) EMOTIONS, which were foreign to dada" (JTOS 260).

Grabbing up the poor object was, for Kantor, more than just an act of rebellion. It was also a validation, a summoning of an inherent power within the object itself. In *The Return of Odysseus*, he chose objects like a "board" and "a gun barrel" and treated them as independent authorities. But he selected not just any "board" or "gun": the board was rotten, the gun-barrel

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contradiction in age or gender greatly appealed to Kantor's taste for dissonance. The role of the Cleaning Woman was actually played by a middle-aged man, the Old Man in the WC was an older woman, and so on. The character's gender, to the extent that it mattered, would be revealed through costumes and props. For the sake of simplicity, I default to pronouns appropriate to the character, rather than the actual gender of the actor.

rusty. Their poverty was essential: “This condition of being ‘poor’ disclosed the object’s deeply hidden objectness” (FON 113). They presented reality, but it was specifically an independent reality – reality distinct from whatever purpose or interpretation Kantor or another human might try to assign to it. The objects and spaces of Kantor’s theatre declared, by virtue of their age and abuse, their own inherent existence.

Kantor’s embrace of the “poor” will, for many, inevitably evoke director Jerzy Grotowski, and his concept of “poor theatre.” Grotowski’s adoption of this same term became one of several causes for antipathy between them. In her 2012 comparison of these two titans of 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish theatre, Magda Romanska argues that the verbal connection between them is misleading. Like Kantor, Grotowski believed that poverty in theatre “revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form” (Grotowski 21). But this is where any similarity between them ends. Romanska notes that in Polish, each artist used a subtly but significantly different word for their approach that English translation reduces to the same term: “poor”. Grotowski used the word “*ubogi*” which translates as “poor means”: poor as in simple, rather than extravagant or lavish. Kantor used the adjective “*biedny*” which “denotes both material poverty and a psychological condition of complete destitution, loneliness, and loss” – poverty with an attached affective component (Romanska 12). This, in part, helps to explain why they arrived at entirely different conceptions of what constitutes theatre’s “poverty.” When Grotowski stripped away what he saw as non-essential to theatre he was left with only the actor, and located the entire potential of the theatrical medium in that vessel.<sup>115</sup> The poverty that fascinated Kantor led him to theatre’s most pitiful and abandoned materials – its objects – and he declared their coarse

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<sup>115</sup> “[W]e consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art” (Grotowski 15).

humility the essence of theatre. This fundamental contrast deeply undercut any similarities between them. Even though they both explored questions of space and time, and life and death, Grotowski began from a place that was animate. Kantor did the opposite.

The idea of the poor object expanded into what Kantor called “The Reality of the Lowest Rank.”<sup>116</sup> In his next movement, *the Theatre Informel* (FON 118), Kantor aligned himself with the agenda of art “Informel,” which he declared to be “a discovery of a new unknown aspect of reality, of its elementary state... This state is: MATTER” (FON 116). What attracted Kantor to “poor” objects was their proximity to such raw matter. It took forms such as, “MUD, EARTH, CLAY, DEBRIS, MILDEW, ASHES.” Kantor noted that the activities which revealed the inherent matter of an object were those which would wear it away – “COMPRESSION, TEARING, BURNING, SMEARING” (FON 116). These objects were the products of time – their wounds and their decay were the scars of age, carved (compressed, burned, smeared) into them. In this type of matter, time became visible and tactile, but also therefore, subservient to the potency of the matter itself. These processes, seemingly destructive, were in fact the revelation of the secret autonomy inherent in the objects themselves. Their earthen ashy qualities connected them, by no coincidence, to the realm of the cemetery. Their seeming refusal to participate in human life would necessarily align them with death.

Kantor’s exaltation of the raw power of matter reveals another aspect of his art, one which further divides him from the realm of dada: his “SPIRITUALISM” (JTOS 261). In a lecture from 1986 on his artistic practice, Kantor claimed that it was necessary to make a

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<sup>116</sup> “TEN YEARS LATER, THE ADJECTIVE POOR WAS EXPANDED AND TRANSFORMED INTO A NEW AND SHARPER PHRASE: THE REALITY OF THE LOWEST RANK” (FON 117).

“revision” to the spirit of Dada to acknowledge his affective, transcendental awareness. His use of matter gave him access to a “PREMONITION OF THE OTHER WORLD/ THE MEANING OF DEATH...” and an apprehension of the “INACCESSIBLE” (JTOS 261). In locating this metaphysical potency in matter, Kantor reveals his debt to Bruno Schulz, the Polish author whose work codifies the idea of “sentient space.” Kantor was fully aware of this influence – remarking once that “his whole generation had grown up ‘in the shadow of Schulz’” (Pleśniarowicz 27). The unique uncanny landscape that Schulz created in his stories is the literary parallel to Kantor’s theatre. His most well known novel, *The Street of Crocodiles*, directly presents the ideology that inspired Kantor:

My father never tired of glorifying this extraordinary element – matter. ‘There is no dead matter,’ he taught us, ‘lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life. The range of these forms is infinite and their shades and nuances limitless.’ (Schulz 30)

Kantor’s own words echo these sentiments – he could in fact be the narrator’s very father himself. Also like Kantor, this father believed that the infinite potency of matter cried out for creativity – that by acknowledging the invisible life of matter, men like him could become god-like creators in their own right:

‘Demiurge, that great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bearlike awkwardness.’ (Schulz 33)

Schulz seemed a disciple of this philosophy in his writing, describing spaces and objects with perhaps more attention than his human characters. These descriptions come across less as anthropomorphization and instead, as deference to an inherent sentience, a latent potency in the inanimate items themselves.

Kantor’s insistence on the “independence” of his poor objects recognizes that sentience, and celebrates it. The benches, books, and wooden boards were all selected because of an

inherent consciousness, one that is revealed in their fleshly decay – their stink, their putridity, their rot. They are the ancestors to Julian Crouch’s object-puppets, to the Quay Brothers’ searching needles and self-animating dust. Kantor did not “imbue” these objects with life; he simply permitted them to inhabit the life they already own. These “objects” are also “actors” – they act both within the performance and upon the audience. The fraying desiccated rope that delimits the classroom does not simply designate the space of the performance; it creates the very boundary that Kantor called “THE CONDITION OF DEATH.” It acts as a constant reminder of Kantor’s belief that in the theatre, “The only living beings are the spectators.” His theatre demonstrates how an inanimate object, given the appropriate attention, can transform the space and reality that surround it.

The initial image of *The Dead Class* declares its Schulzian metaphysics. The pews and books scream out for attention, as the human figures recede into a non-sentient background. Kantor, like Schulz, embraced the corporeal substantiality of matter. Their objects are marked with the impression and traces of time, even as they resist time in their enduring materiality. They complicate what it means to age, and to be old. The requirement that all objects in the production bear (and bare) the evidence of time held equally for the actors, who would come to serve as objects themselves.

### **The Entrance – Age as Objectification**

*Suddenly, the students enter – blank, dry, emotionless faces, dressed in black. The “Old People” as Kantor called them, form a rather pitiful group as they filter in. Without question or negotiation, they take up their seats in the wooden pews. Their places are designated – this is where they have always sat. Once in position, they assemble themselves into a tableau peering forwards towards the audience. Some rise out of their seats, or lean to one side or another to get a better view – those at the back rising higher than those towards the front. The image is a sea of pallid faces, a gentle wave of breath quietly stilled. A strange class portrait. On cue, they descend back to their seats, one row at a time. And then abruptly, one man in the back row raises his hand – answering an unspoken question, or perhaps asking one. The gesture is infectious; the others raise their hands imploringly, their urgency clarifying the question – a request to leave. With their hands*



*raised, they leave their seats, faces always turned forwards toward some unknown authority as they retreat towards the door through which they came. In their eagerness to depart, they do not notice that they have left one of their number behind. A fellow classmate returns to retrieve him. He guides his catatonic counterpart backwards out of the room, a lethargic arm linked around his own. One stringless puppet leading another. The students are gone.*

Here are the “OLD PEOPLE”, as Kantor specifically refers to them, who return at the end of their life to take up their childhood again. Some of them are indeed old. But even the actors who are younger in years are also presented as elderly. It is not their actual age that makes them old. Instead, to be “old” is a directive, a command that the performers mark themselves in time, through movement and physicality. Kantor says of the old people, that, “they believe they are still children.” But he also admonishes that “The actors must not play the parts of the children. They have to be either old people themselves or play the parts of the old people who return perversely to their childhood” (FON 247). The actors do not “play” children. Rather, they play the old *playing* the young.

Their “oldness” is not a question of distance from birth; rather and more importantly it is their proximity to death, which is conveyed via their resemblance to an inanimate object. Their make-up increases the waxy pallor of their skin. They use automatic and repetitive motions. Their focus is sustained and distant – the gaze of people who are trying to remember something now forgotten. Kantor’s approach highlights the way in which aging often translates to a loss of agency. The elderly become increasingly dependent – trapped in their infirmity and frailty. The loss of speech and mobility can cause those at the end of their lives to resemble inanimate furniture more than persons. They are carried or carted about in wheelchairs or stretchers. They obtain quiet stillness for long periods of time, broken sometimes by attempts at conversation that either seem meaningless or simply lose momentum. They are easily overlooked or ignored, and recede from active life even before

they are yet dead. The consciousness they retain within them retreats further and further inward.

This approach to age converted the actors in *The Dead Class* into performing objects. They modeled themselves on the inanimate as it strives for animation – in other words, on automatons, on puppets, or robots. Kantor made extensive use of “automation” as an acting technique – an idea he first discovered during the phase he called “Zero Theatre.” This approach was part of Kantor’s attempt to create an Autonomous Theatre. Just as he strove to liberate objects and matter from the chains of interpretation or utility, Kantor sought to create a theatre independent of the chains of “representation.” To Kantor, using theatre to merely interpret an existing play-text was a subjugation of its own capacities and capabilities. In his Zero Theatre, Kantor took a negative approach, attempting to place the theatre in active tension and conflict with the text. The theatrical elements (setting, props, costumes) were designed to frustrate the presentation of a text, rather than translate or interpret it. He encouraged anti-activity, in which the actors became “unwilling” to act, abandoning the text, or interacting with it in ways that are “forbidden,” and “surreptitious” (FON 149-152).

In *The Dead Class*, The Old People do use a play text, mostly in the second half of the performance: *Tumor Brainowicz*, by Ignacy Witkiewicz. In his productions, Kantor worked almost exclusively with Witkiewicz’s plays. But these play texts were also treated as objects, by virtue of these destructive methods. In *The Dead Class*, Kantor attacks the text, detaching it from plot and continuity, using it throughout in fragments. The old people take up the lines and the roles (which are additionally laid over their roles within the classroom), but they become lost. They forget their lines; they repeat phrases. Each attempt to portray a scene ultimately fails and devolves again into nothing. This was the value he saw in “automation,” his primary technique for the destruction of meaning:

The nature of automatic activity  
is defined by its constant repetition.  
After some time, this repetition completely deprives  
Both the activity and the object of their meaning. (FON 152)

Automatic and repetitive activities suggest a time without direction, or a circular progression, which returns constantly to the same place. The automatic is another tool for the conversion of time into space. Throughout the course of *The Dead Class*, Kantor's old people repeat gestures, lines and actions to the point where they become isolated and futile. They engage in a series of "nonsense" lessons on subjects such as "Prometheus" or "Solomon." The question and answer sessions devolve into a meaningless cycle of repeated gestures and lines. These repetitions and automations negate the actors' own vitality, and allow them to play the dead playing the living. The effect is not unlike the hyper-controlled movement of *Sleep No More's* dancers – who perform a precise sequence of events in a repeating loop multiple times over the course of the evening. There, as here, the rigid control establishes an unbreakable barrier between the performers and the spectators, a barrier between life and death. While *Sleep No More's* paradigm achieves the sensation that the spectators are ghosts, in the *Dead Class*, the effect is equal but reversed, establishing the performers as inhabitants of the realm of the dead.

Text, actors, and props – all are presented as equivalent objects, puppets without a puppeteer (or with Kantor as the only puppeteer). This implied puppet-life, however, would soon be eclipsed by its very archetype.

### The Parade of Dead Childhood – the Object as Actor

*A mere breath after they have left, the Old People reappear, leaping into the doorway to land percussively in sight. The music begins – a waltz. Each old person is now adorned by a wax doll dummy – a puppet child figure, matching the adult in costume and appearance. The doll wraps around and into his or her*

corresponding adult like a growth, or an extraneous limb. In bizarre and carnivalesque fashion, these creatures begin a circuit around the room.

First – the old woman with a whip. She carries her childhood self ruthlessly under one arm as she strides forward, chest puffed up and preening. Every few steps, she pauses to whip the ground three times. Following her, the old man with the bicycle. His doll rests upon that bicycle, facing upwards, head thrust back. The child has grown into the bicycle itself, so that the motion of the bike also moves the doll – each rotation of the wheels pumps one arm up and down, a gesture of protest, perhaps, or a plea that the old man does not notice.

Then an old man with overflowing white hair, who occupies the WC/latrine for much of the production. His doll is splayed across his arms, limbs in all directions, so that the man's arms and the doll's intermingle. The actor's arms hover in place as if in denial or ignorance of the object they carry. At times, he executes bizarre conductorly movements, which jerks the doll spasmodically, but he displays no awareness of the body that these movements animate.

Behind him, another child figure clings to the back of his adult, the arms wrapped tightly around his owner's neck like a strange child-backpack. The next doll, a young girl, enacts a similarly desperate chokehold on her old person. Then another girl, perched perilously on the hip of her adult. The actress holds herself mercilessly erect, a posture that denies the indignity of the child shaped protrusion dangling from one side. The child's bare feet brush the floor with each step.

Then an even stranger arrangement – an adult sandwiched in between two dolls, one at his waist, and another tossed over his shoulders. He moves spastically in stops and starts, as if trying to escape his dual demons, but the grip of the dolls does not diminish. Instead, each movement reverberates in their limbs, as if shocking them back to life with a defibrillator. Another young boy on another old man's back. And then a quartet, two old men and their two dolls bound up together, an elaborate pieta in motion.

At the rear of this procession one figure walks alone, seemingly without a childhood self. His bare feet and simplistic movements reveal his true identity – he is actually a doll himself, the only one capable of self-motion, and perhaps more frightening because he lacks a corresponding old person. Is this a child who did not grow up? What is his relationship to the other mannequin figures?<sup>117</sup>

The strange parade circumnavigates the classroom three times, and then the circus draws to a close. Several of the old people deposit their dolls in a rough heap in the corner of the room, on top of the musty and moldy old books, before returning to their places in the pews. Others go to their seats with their childhood selves still in tow. The classroom is again a sea of faces, but this time, the faces of dead mannequins intermingle with the living actors blending in discomforting unity. The music of the waltz fades to silence.

And this, Kantor tells us, is the whole point. He himself stated clearly:

This is the MAIN IDEA of the piece... I have an idea of merging the actors, the Old People, who are returning to their classroom of yesteryear in order to reclaim their childhood, with the wax figures representing children in school uniforms. (FON 242)

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<sup>117</sup> "In the last version of *The Dead Class*, Kantor placed a live boy in an old style school uniform among the dolls seated at the benches. He was a *third* type of person: he remained outside the conflict between the mannequins of childhood and the *dead* old people. He was a sort of pure symbol of the isolation and irrationality of the heroes of the séance, a necessary visual addition to the summoning up of the unconscious" (Pleśniarowicz 227).

Kantor's discovery of Death was also a discovery of the MANNEQUIN. It too, was an idea Kantor had touched on before, and it grew from his most fundamental tenets. As he explored the Theatre of Death, he began to appreciate the figure's true significance:

On the streets of the official avant-garde. MANNEQUINS appear...

The mannequin as manifestation of the 'REALITY OF THE LOWEST RANK.'

The MANNEQUIN as procedure of TRANSGRESSION.

The MANNEQUIN as an EMPTY object. A FAÇADE. Message of

DEATH. A model for an actor. (FON 234)

Kantor's discovery of the power of the mannequin in theatre was not unique. Several theoreticians before him declared that the stage needed an inanimate figure (rather than an actor) to produce its full potential. Kantor was aware of and respected these predecessors. In developing his Theatre of Death, he specifically drew upon the thoughts of Edward Gordon Craig and Heinrich von Kleist. Both, Kantor wrote, "demanded that a marionette be substituted for an actor," and "regarded the human organism, which was subject to the laws of NATURE, as a foreign intrusion into Artistic Fiction built according to the principles of Construction and Intellect" (FON 231). Kantor admired their position, but his interest in the marionette was of a distinctly different tone. Craig appealed to the marionette to create greater "homogeneity and cohesion" in the work of theatre – the human element being too messy and unreliable. Kantor appreciated this figure for the opposite effect. He invited in the marionette to better "encounter the UNKNOWN!" (FON 234). He did not value mannequins because they could easily be controlled. Their physical manipulability interested him far less than the secret and unreachable internal life they owned, completely beyond any human power to control:

Mannequins have also their TRANSGRESSIONS. The existence of these creatures, created in the image of a human being, almost "godlessly," illegally, is the result of heretical activities, a manifestation of the Dark, Nocturnal, Rebellious human side. Of Crime and a Trace of Death as the source of cognition. This vague and inexplicable

feeling that through this entity, looking almost like a human being but deprived of consciousness and human destiny, a terrifying message of Death and Nothingness is transmitted to us. It is precisely this feeling that is the cause simultaneously of transgression, rejection, and attraction. Of Indictment and fascination. (FON 235)

Kantor saw the mannequin's potential to directly stimulate the conflicting emotions of the uncanny.<sup>118</sup>

Kantor's mannequins bear a deeper resemblance to the tailor's dummies of Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* than to Craig's marionettes. They are not an idealized human form, but rather, a close relative of raw matter. Just as Kantor's "Reality of the Lowest Rank" evolved into the form of the mannequin, Father's adulation of matter in the novel leads him to worship the "tailor's dummy." He argues that in this form matter is most powerfully shaped/imprisoned. He lectures a small audience including his son and the young domestic women of their household about the grave importance of such creatures:

'Figures in a waxwork museum,' he began, 'even fairground parodies of dummies, must not be treated lightly. Matter never makes jokes: it is always full of the tragically serious. Who dares to think that you can play with matter, that you can shape it for a joke, that the joke will not be built in, will not eat into it like fate, like destiny? Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed form which is no more than a parody?' (Schulz 35)

Even as he mourns for those dummies, Father experiences an obsessive desire to create precisely these figures, and thus take on the status of demiurge. But he knows that once created, they have an identity, a voice all their own – their status as matter cries out, if one only knows how to listen:

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<sup>118</sup> Kantor also included authors ETA Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe in his intellectual history of the mannequin (JTOS 107), though he does not discuss their work in any detail. But in simply noting their place in the evolution of this idea, he is pointing to a specifically uncanny legacy for this figure. Hoffman, Poe, Schulz and Kantor all used mannequins to access the dangerous realm of the unconscious.

‘Have you heard at night the terrible howling of these wax figures, shut in the fair booths; the pitiful chorus of those forms of wood or porcelain, banging their fists against the walls of their prisons?’ (Schulz 36).

Kantor heard that same cry, the one that resounds in the work of Crouch and the Quay Brothers. The tragic protest of the inanimate is fundamental to his *Theatre of Death*. But Kantor was better positioned to present Schulz’s ideas than Schulz himself ever could. In his theatre, Kantor could confront his audience with an actual mannequin – its undeniable physical reality demonstrating its concealed but present consciousness. He replaced the narrative image of an object with nothing less than the object itself. Perhaps the most terrifying thing that these mannequins did over the course of the performance was simply this – they looked at us.

Kantor did not seek to substitute these figures for the actor, but rather to integrate them into the theatrical experience for their unique value:

I do not believe that a MANNEQUIN (or a WAX FIGURE) could replace a LIVE ACTOR, as Kleist and Craig wanted. This would be too simple and too naïve. I am trying to describe the motives and the uses of this unusual creature which suddenly appeared in my thoughts and idea. Its appearance complies with my ever-stronger conviction that life can only be expressed in art through the absence of life, through an appeal to DEATH, through APPEARANCES, through EMPTINESS, and the lack of a MESSAGE. (FON 235)

His mannequins would share the stage with his actors, as “immaterial extensions” or “DOUBLES of live characters, endowed as if with a higher CONSCIOUSNESS, attained ‘after the completion of their lives.’ These mannequins were already clearly marked with the sign of DEATH” (FON 234). In addition to being co-present with his living actors, the mannequin would function as “A model for the live ACTOR,” an example for them to emulate. If the dummies demonstrated a “higher” consciousness, an access to some deeper knowledge, the actors strove to evacuate their consciousness in order to better represent the dead. Their symbiotic existence was perfectly encompassed in this parade around the

classroom. The morbid intertwining embrace between the living and the dead constructed a physical and spatial connection between two polar and opposed temporalities. Together, the actors and mannequins became an uncanny bridge, a point of crossover between life and death.<sup>119</sup>

Very few theorists have specifically used the word uncanny to describe Kantor's work. In a short article in *Puppetry International*, Jacob Juntunen does in fact label this effect in *The Dead Class*, and points to precisely this eerie interaction between puppet and human as its source. He stresses that this relationship "pushed beyond a typical puppet show and the inversed actor/mannequin connection illustrated the uncanny" (16-17). What was uncanny about this interaction was not the difference between these figures, but rather, their unexpected similarity. In Kantor's theatre, elderly actor and child puppet were not opposite, but rather equivalents, both existing in a realm between life and death. Within the production, Kantor's mannequins behaved "uncannily life-like" and the actors imitated corpses. Juntunen asserts that "the juxtaposition of seemingly dead actors and living dolls shows an anxiety, long-suppressed, that each of our living, breathing, human bodies are nothing more than inanimate matter briefly endowed with the qualities we define as life" (Juntunen 17-18). These "living dolls" were metonymic of Kantor's Theatre of Death, in which all the "objects" achieved a kind of life-in-death. Juntunen further asserts that these objects channel the realm of the dead: "the ... objects created a uniquely haunting performance, presenting death in a concretized form, what [Kantor] called a theatrical 'séance'" (15). In the space of his short article, Juntunen is unable to explore *how* these objects "concretized" death, and by what

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<sup>119</sup> "I would state further that theatre is the place that reveals – like some fords in a river do – the traces of 'transition' 'from that other side' into our life" (FON 350-351).



means Kantor summons the dead to his theatrical séance. His valuable assertion is an invitation to a more thorough inquiry.

### **Dolls, Doubles, Death – The (Tran)Substantiation of Memory**

*The students leave their seats, summoned by phrases torn from history – “The ides of March! The wings of the capitol! Alea jacta est! Galia est omnia divisa em partes tres!”*

*A “soldier” enters, parading to the beat of the waltz, chest covered in bandages, aiming a rifle forwards at a sharp and exaggerated diagonal, like the prow of a ship. The fact that this “soldier” is portrayed by a young and classically beautiful actress lends ‘him’ a certain melancholy. Abruptly and unexpectedly, he collapses, or more accurately, winds down, folding his body onto the floor. The music ceases with this motion, and the rest of the class peers down onto the fallen body. After a few moments, the figure rises back up, as though “rewinding” the gesture of collapse which he has just completed. Likewise, the music resumes, as the soldier takes up the initial pose and continues to parade around the classroom. Seven more steps, and then another collapse. Another resurrection, and again the soldier is on his way. The other students join him circling around the classroom, taking up again their mannequins as they go. This time, some of the old people carry other old people as their burdens.*

*Then with one unanimous decision, they reject the doll mannequins, and pile them all in the corner on top of the books, increasing the rubbish heap. The young male actor who portrays in himself a dead childhood makes his lonely journey to the rubbish heap, and lies down at the foot of the pile, eyes staring upwards.*

In labeling Kantor’s work uncanny, Juntunen’s primary evidence comes from psychoanalysis. He turns to Freud and suggests that Kantor’s theatre can be understood as exemplary of the theories of his essay. But a deeper exploration of Kantor’s work reveals that it does far more than illustrate Freudian theory – rather it presents its own alternate conception of the uncanny, one that, while it does not replace Freud, in many ways, can subsume his theory within his theatrical practice.

Freud, as discussed in Chapter One, proved resistant to analyzing the uncanny figure of the doll, and struggled to properly explain its effect by virtue of repression. The questions raised by the puppets of *Shockheaded Peter* proved particularly problematic for Freud. They prove challenging for Juntunen as well here. He does not offer a strong explanation from Freud for the uncanny effect of the mannequin because in fact, Freud does not have one.

Without performing a (potentially uncanny) repetition of my first chapter, a proper consideration of Kantor's dolls requires us to engage with Freud once again. Reading Freud's essay with assistance from Hélène Cixous revealed his suppression of the doll's theatricality, and prompted a visceral examination of *Shockheaded Peter* and its puppets. Kantor's dolls as well demand to be understood as more than symbols. They are sensual, embodied encounters with the uncanny. Furthermore, they exaggerate perhaps the most dangerous quality of the doll, one that I touched on in Chapter One, but did not pursue fully – its intimate connection to the grave. In many ways, the realm of the dead is *the* unanswered question of the Freudian uncanny. Kantor's Theatre of Death requires a direct confrontation with that question.

It is not just the doll that Freud handles dismissively in his essay – he depreciates the importance of death itself. Though he acknowledges that for many, “the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts,” Freud quickly moves past this material (Freud 148). He conflates our fear of death with “primitive” beliefs, and simply extends his definition of the uncanny as a return of the repressed to cover a return of the primitive as well. Freud tosses the entire netherworld dismissively onto the rubbish heap, alongside dolls and automata. But death does not blink.

The issue of mortality continues to nag at Freud as he shifts his attention from the doll to the double. This figure is indeed a close relative, possibly even the ancestor of the doll: Freud notes how in “ancient Egypt,” the appeal of the double “became a spur to artists to form images of the dead in durable materials” (142), a process which would lead to statues and figurines, and eventually back to dolls and puppets. The double reintroduces the question of death, but as the product of desire, rather than fear. Freud claims that the double offers a specific wish-fulfillment – that of immortality. The double, he asserts, “was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self...” (142), which in fact, is exactly the way in which

Kantor uses doubles in *Today is my Birthday*. The contention that Kantor lives on in that performance is evidence that his alter-egos did offer a kind of protection from his own death. But Freud must then explain how these doubles, fulfilling our desire for protection from death, become a source of fear. Unable to point directly to repression here, he makes a significant shift in his vocabulary:

These ideas arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and the primitive man, and when this phase is surmounted, the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (Freud 142)

From “repressed” to “surmounted” – Freud equates the childish mind with primitive beliefs, and draws a direct equation between the psychic phenomenon by which childhood fears are hidden away to a “surmounting” of primitive beliefs.

The experiences are hardly equivalent, and the explanation falls short of Freud’s goals. All he has achieved, at most, is the designation of two distinct and somewhat incompatible species within one still mysterious genus. Even Freud himself seems rather unconvinced. He acknowledges that our response to death is one of our most trenchant and enduring beliefs: “in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so little since primitive times... our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality” (148). So in fact, our fear of death has not been surmounted. The endurance of this fear forces Freud to admit “one might ask what has become of repression, which is necessary if the primitive is to return as something uncanny” (149). His half-hearted answer is actually contradictory – “it is there too: so-called educated people have officially ceased to believe that the dead can become visible” and “their emotional attitude to the dead, once highly ambiguous and ambivalent, has been toned down” (149). He claims simultaneously that this “official”

repression by educated people explains the uncanny emotional response, while also arguing that the emotional response has been “toned down.”

Juntunen attempts to move around the Freudian flaw by shifting from the question of death in general to a particular kind of death, one that in fact can be understood in terms of repression. He suggests that Kantor’s mannequins represent our “knowledge of millions of children’s deaths in Kantor’s homeland, repressed in our daily lives...forced into our consciousness” (17). Juntunen claims that the “Dead” which Kantor is hoping to access are “Kantor’s childhood classmates...; the millions of World War II dead in Kantor’s native Galicia...” and the victims of “the nearby Nazi camps” (Juntunen 15). There is much that can be said in support of this claim. Kantor came to maturity, both as an artist and a man, in a world continuously influenced by the harsh reality of war. His childhood was unusually pervaded with the presence of death. He was born in 1915 into a world of conflict that would carry off his own father. Once drafted into the army, Marian Kantor never rejoined his family. He remained politically active until he was sent to his death in a concentration camp in World War II. During that time period, Kantor was exposed directly to the atrocities of the Holocaust, of which he wrote, “The world stood near death, and by association, near poetry...”<sup>120</sup> Kantor was an admittedly odd child – he would likely have pursued encounters with death even if the war had not brought them to him so abundantly. (One of his favorite locations to play was the cemetery.) But the conflicts of his homeland directly informed his particular understanding of death. Their presence can be felt in his association between dead and dying humans and inanimate objects. The nightmarish images of mass graves can be seen in the act of piling up the dolls like so much garbage.

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<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Pleśniarowicz, 35.

In a lecture he gave in 1986 about his artistic process and beliefs, Kantor was explicit about what he learned from WWII:

World War II.  
Genocide,  
Concentration Camps,  
Crematories,  
Human Beasts,  
Death,  
Tortures,  
Humankind turned into mud, soap, and ashes,  
Debasement,  
The time of contempt... (JTOS 259)

Kantor claimed that his attraction to the poor object and reality of the lowest rank was a response to these atrocities. That response took the form of a rejection of any political ideology in favor of a move inwards, towards his own personal reality. In fact, Kantor felt that such introspection was the only appropriate response to a world of “contempt”:

It is only one's world that is of any importance, that is,  
The world that is created in isolation and separation,  
The world that is so strong and suggestive  
That it has enough power to occupy and maintain  
A predominant part of the space  
Within the space of life. (JTOS 263)

He saw introspection as an act of both childlike narcissism and humility that appealed in the face of perverted political power: “And here is the map of this battle: in the front, there is the contempt (mine) for ‘general’ and official History, the history of mass Movements, mass ideologies, passing terms of Governments, terror by power, mass wars, mass crimes... Against these ‘powers’ stands the Small, Poor, Defenseless, but magnificent History of individual human life” (FON 390). Kantor's work, and *the Dead Class* in particular, merits exploration both in terms of its political and historical context, and as an exploration of his inner world.

There is much to be learned from approaching Kantor's work more thoroughly in the context of this traumatic history, but such an exploration would better be served by a full-

length study of 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish theatre (such as the one Magda Romanska has written) than an inquiry into the uncanny.<sup>121</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, it is important to recognize that as much as these mannequins may give voice to the silenced victims of the holocaust, these dolls also can and do speak for themselves. The danger in seeing these mannequins *only* as literal representations of dead bodies is that this reduces the strange symbiotic relationship between the old people and their doll-doubles to a single dimension. Juntunen argues that, “since the performing objects in *Dead Class* were attached to the actors in ways that constrained human movement, the mannequins of dead children constantly hindered the actors just as traumatic memories of the dead hamper the living” (Juntunen 16). By this analysis, the mannequins are the dead; the old people the living. The mannequins are the forgotten, the old people, the ones who can remember.

But Kantor is explicit that the relationship between doll and actor is not one of difference, but of identity: “The Old People, carry them – their own childhood... These ‘tumors’ are THEY THEMSELVES, Old People’s ‘LARVAE’ containing inside them the entire memory of their CHILDHOOD, which was killed by their ADOLESCENCE” (FON 242-243). These are not actually children who have died in childhood. These are children who died by virtue of growing old. The Old People are also dead, or at least, *as dead* as the dolls

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<sup>121</sup> See *The Post-Traumatic Theatre of Grotowski and Kantor*. Magda Romanska argues that the critical reception of these two artists has actually not given enough credit to the influence that Poland’s tortured 20<sup>th</sup> century history had for them. Her book argues that most of the available analysis of Kantor in the English language performs its own reduction, a dehistoricization and decontextualization (Romanska 3-7). Her book makes an invaluable contribution to balancing out that tendency, and is capable of exploring the impact of Poland’s traumatic history on Kantor in far greater detail than I could here. By emphasizing Kantor’s universal sense of the uncanny over more specific historical influences, I am admittedly continuing the trend that Romanska criticizes. But my purpose is distinct from hers. While I acknowledge the need to contextualize Kantor in terms of a more specific historiography, such work is about clarifying his role in terms of the past. In positioning him as a generative force of the theatrical uncanny, I see myself as linking Kantor to theatre’s present and future.

are: “the world of the childhood and the world of the old people. Both are on the margins, like human reserves. Both touch upon the condition of nothingness and death” (FON 248). In Kantor’s theatre, the status of “being dead” is not reserved for corpses. The child puppets suggest a more intimate and simultaneously universal death – the loss we each experience of our past selves. They suggest that the process of aging, the march towards our actual death, is actual a journey of a thousand deaths along the way, the sacrifice or slaughter we must each commit of who we once were, in order to be who we now are.

Even tossed upon the rubbish heap, these dolls continue to exert a palpable pull on our attention. They require that we look down and meet their gaze. Kantor’s mannequins epitomize the power of all his theatre’s objects. They declare their own inscrutable consciousness – their knowledge of something we don’t know but should, or once knew, but have since forgotten. They suggest a different relationship, a more organic and symbiotic relationship, between memory and death. Kantor’s mannequins do more than bring the dead to our attention; they literally recast memory itself as death. Memory begins to reveal itself as the ultimate poor object.

### **The Dead Memory Machine – Reviving the Memory Object**

*A new figure enters, bare-chested in a long black cloak and carrying a black flag. He runs to the front of the classroom and waves the flag before the class. They sway with its movements. I take possession, he cries, of this land! The students gather around the new figure to create a class “portrait.” The man from the bicycle machine crosses in front of them with an elaborate contraption before his chest. It looks like the unholy child of a box camera and an accordion – the lens attached to a long and tapered folding trunk. One hand stabilizes the machine, the other, outstretched, holds a gun. He calls the students to attention. He takes the picture by simultaneously firing the gun as the folded camera proboscis erupts outwards from his chest (it’s controlled by a rope which the cleaning woman operates). Image as photographic ejaculation, and photograph as assassination.*

Memory and death share an intimate and indivisible bond – without one, the other loses its significance. In *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Pogue Harrison meditates on the role

the dead play in the world of the living, and notes that it is memory that makes such an afterlife possible. Or rather, the most important interpretation of his book would assert that it is our treatment of the dead that makes memory, and future life, possible. He uncovers the “humic foundations of our life worlds” by which contents are “buried so that they may be reclaimed by the future” (x). The act of burial, for Harrison, broadly means any way in which we “store, preserve, and put the past on hold” (xi). Remembering, the act of retrieving the past, is always a process of exhumation.

Kantor viewed theatre itself as such a process of resurrection. But for Kantor that attempted resurrection was necessarily impossible, even as it remained unceasing.

Pleśniarowicz writes:

The fundamental characteristic of Kantor’s Theatre of Death is the obsessive demonstration... that is impossible to resurrect the dead pre-existence of the performance... The Theatre of Death is conceived and staged exactly as the *inability* to resurrect drama, plot, characters and regions of memory, since their vestigial, partial life belongs among existences and events that have died, even if they have not yet been totally forgotten. (Pleśniarowicz 186)

Pleśniarowicz argues that Kantor’s work classified “drama, plot, characters and regions of memory” within the realm of the dead, and then staged the impossible attempt to restore these materials to life. Of those dead elements, one transcends all others. The fundamental condition that Kantor attempted to resurrect was MEMORY – “drama, plot, characters” are all just subsets there-of. In the *Dead Class*, as in most of the productions that followed it, the futility of memory became the dominant theme, and the attempt to restore memory to life became Kantor’s foremost goal. The very impossibility of that attempt revealed memory’s liminal status, caught always in a realm somewhere between life and death.

His interest in reviving memory led Kantor to investigate our mnemonic machinery: the technologies we use to record and preserve, to enhance and deepen our recollection. He



was drawn to the camera in particular as a potent metaphor for his Theatre of Death. In this device and its products, Kantor found a model for the mortality of memory.<sup>122</sup> He equated the futility of resurrecting past memory to the impossibility of giving life to “photographic plates”:

‘In reminiscence there is never action, only photographic plates’, said Kantor immediately after the production of his next play, *Wielopole, Wielopole*, in which he tried to recreate the very structure of memory: ‘I do not even develop the photographic plate, I only lift it out of the reservoir of memory’. (Pleśniarowicz 187)

Pleśniarowicz demonstrates how Kantor made use of “the metaphysics of photography,” throughout the Theatre of the Dead and *the Dead Class* in particular (188). The staged portrait described above is the most literal example, but Pleśniarowicz identifies the static images throughout the production as photographs as well. These include the first image of the students after they take their seats, as well as the image created by the music of the waltz, which gradually pulls them up to a standing climactic position. The actors attempt to escape the image in action and gesture and even in the text borrowed from Witkiewicz’ play, *Tumor Brainowicz*, but again and again “everything... congeals into the original image from the past which, at Kantor’s signal a moment later, disintegrates again” (Pleśniarowicz 188). The production moves rhythmically in and out of these images.

Pleśniarowicz even considers certain cyclical actions – the repeated journeys around the classroom and the lessons for example – to be a kind of “photograph” as well, photographs “containing movement and created by both image and sound” (188). Such photographs would seem to bear similarity to film – an alternate method of preserving the past. But even though

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<sup>122</sup> The complex relationship between photography, memory and death is a field of aesthetic inquiry in its own right, and could productively yield an additional chapter of exploration. In particular Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* theorizes the presence of death in every photograph. Michal Kobialka has written an essay, “Of Last Things in *Memento Mori*: Silence, eternity and death” in which he productively uses Barthes’ theories on the photograph to understand Kantor specifically. For my purposes here, I seek to call attention to Kantor’s use of the photograph as a memory object, to pursue how he then engages that object in space. For the moment, I bypass this broader aesthetic inquiry.

he would have had access to both, Kantor chose to work with the experiential qualities of photography rather than cinema. In part, this reflects a certain nostalgia, the camera being a technology of the past as much as the present. The specific camera he references in the production is particularly dated. But the more meaningful reason for his use of photography is the concept of futile resurrection. Kantor's commitment to the impossible animation of the inanimate was best expressed by the inherent conflict between the *still* two-dimensional image and the action and space of the theatre. His actors would wander through the three-dimensional space of the room, only to resolve into a front-oriented image. His theatre constantly struggled to achieve movement, but that effort would deteriorate into stillness. When Pleśniarowicz refers to the cyclical actions and repeated movements as "photographs" he is not avoiding a discussion of film and cinema. He is demonstrating purposefully that these events were, to Kantor, equally dead and inert, as lifeless and manipulable as the objects on his stage. Just like the static images, they could be repeated in a constant but self-defeating attempt to instill these dead moments with life.

Their constant repetition links the technology and experience of photography to automation, one of Kantor's preferred tools for encountering the dead. The interaction he explores between theatre, automation and the filmic image foreshadows the final scene of the Quay Brothers' film *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*, in which Felizberto realizes he and Malvina are eternally trapped in an automaton. The miniature theatre space behind the glass becomes the casket of their purgatory – their questionable death in life. The scene that the automaton plays in a repetitive loop is itself a memory (both for Felizberto, and for the film spectator), a fact that provides additional evidence of a Kantorian approach to memory as an object struggling for its own independent life. The Quay Brothers take the implied connection

which Kantor makes between photography and automation and make it actual in this eternal memory prison.

Kantor connects the tools of photography to all the automation and machinery in *The Dead Class*.<sup>123</sup> In addition to the camera/proboscis machine, the production made use of the bicycle-machine propelled by the same man with the camera, and a self-rocking cradle (which contains fittingly enough, a dead/soon-to-be-dead child...) The other significant machine in the production was the sound system, which presented recordings from the realm of the dead – recordings like the waltz, in its many repetitions, the voices of the dead, and the sound of two wooden balls, rocking in that self-propelled cradle... All of these machines, to varying degrees, with their cyclical repetitions and automatic motion, provide the memory object with the appearance of movement/life – an illusion that ultimately collapses in upon itself.

Automation provides a futile attempt to animate memory, but it simultaneously is the tool by which life is extracted from the living. The repetitive actions in the production converted the living actors and their actions into the raw material of death. The camera, as used above, demonstrates most obviously the machine's transformative power. Kantor equates "shooting" a picture with "shooting" a gun.<sup>124</sup> The old people run from this action in terror. Just as a gun converts a human into corpse, a photograph converts a living body into the inanimate – a product of paper and chemical reactions. Both gun and camera, however, are but metaphors for the objectification produced by memory itself:

Memory,  
Makes us of N E G A T I V E S

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<sup>123</sup> Pleśniarowicz considered the connection between the technology of memory and Kantor's theatrical practice so extensive that he refers to the Theatre of Death by another name – *The Dead Memory Machine*.

<sup>124</sup> "...the souvenir picture...demonstrates the stopped, dead time of photography: pistol shots replace the click of a shutter" (Pleśniarowicz 193).

Which are still-frozen –  
Almost like metaphors,  
But unlike narratives –  
Which pulsate,  
Which appear and disappear,  
Which appear and disappear again  
Until the image fades away;  
Until... the tears fill the eyes. (FON 414)

The rhythmic vacillation of memory Kantor describes here takes the frozen memory object and incorporates it into an organic process. In order to give emotional substance to the two-dimensional negative, Kantor had to pull it into the realm of three-dimensional space, even if only temporarily. His process of resurrection was every bit as much a process of spatialization.

### Memory in Space

*The waltz decrescendos, but continues to play...*

*Fragments of the play. As Kantor paces around the classroom, the student with the white hair in the second row produces a worn and tattered manuscript (a cheat sheet), and starts reading from it – a series of random numbers. The girl behind him rises, holding a dirty windowpane in front of her face. She peers over his shoulder, but she also looks through the window into the whole classroom. She is both inside it and outside. She stands above, as though the classroom were in a kind of basement or subterranean level, which an outsider must stoop down to see.*

*The man with the white hair becomes increasingly agitated, rising from his seat and pulling down his pants. It becomes clear he needs to use the facilities; he makes his way over to the lectern/latrine and settles there. The man with the bicycle begins to circle the classroom. The white-haired man tries to follow him, but each time he rises, he realizes his indelicate situation and returns to sit again upon the latrine.*

The critical epiphany that led Kantor to create *The Dead Class* was the discovery that memory has its own spatiality. In a significant passage of his writing, Kantor describes this discovery and the inspiration it formed for the production. He recalls a visit to a small seaside village in 1971 or 72, in which he came upon an old school house: “It was possible to peek into it through dirty, dust-covered windows placed very low... For a long time, I peeked into the

dark interior of my muddled memory” (FON 226).<sup>125</sup> Within, he saw himself again as a young boy, recalling the sensation of ink on his skin, the carvings in the wood of his desk. He continues, “Today I know that something important happened at that WINDOW. I made an important discovery. With an incredible clarity, I became aware of the EXISTENCE OF MEMORY” (FON 226). Kantor “returned” to a classroom, and that room “returned” childhood to him. Of course, this was not his specific classroom that he revisited, but nevertheless in that space, time became elastic. Kantor was both in the past, a student inside the classroom, and in the present, a spectator outside the window.

Kantor’s language is explicit – he became aware, not merely of our recollections of the past – but rather of the *EXISTENCE* of memory. The “memory” that Kantor discovered was not some “shameful and sentimental lyrical metaphor” (FON 226). Rather this memory “LIVES ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH THE REAL EVENTS OF OUR EVERYDAY LIVES” (FON 227). It is in constant interaction and negotiation with the present day – and as such, this memory has physical presence. Just as it came upon Kantor during a walk along the seashore, memory lies waiting in the inanimate matter all around us. Kantor viewed it in an encounter with a decrepit and decaying old building, in the voyeuristic gaze into a “dark interior.” The “dirty dust-covered windows” are essential. They create a border between actual physical matter and its inherent potential as dead memory – a delicious and dangerous tension. Gazing through them, we can access the liminal realm of memory,

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<sup>125</sup> In discussing this event, Kantor did not specify which village exactly. But that ambiguity increases the anecdote’s mythical quality – the schoolhouse could have been in any village, really. The important thing was that it was not in fact his actual schoolhouse, and yet, his memory could overlay the classroom of his childhood upon the actual location in question. We encounter our memories all around us, not just in the specific places in which the remembered events may have happened.

seeing the space as both real and also recollection. The memory space contains eternity in a single moment – it suggests an infinite and yet impossible animation of the inanimate.

Kantor attributed this initial epiphany concerning memory directly to his unique “spatial” imagination.<sup>126</sup> Reflecting in 1988 on this moment he wrote:

It was my DISCOVERY.

...

In order to make this momentous (at least for me) discovery, two things were needed:  
A child’s naïveté  
And the ability to see unique spatial possibilities on the stage  
I had both of them. (FON 412)

The challenge of conveying the space of memory tempted Kantor’s affinity for innovation and impossibility. He struggled with how to evoke the unique dimensionality of memory, which required a space both present and absent simultaneously. He needed to create a “new type of ‘SPACE,’” one which could envelop temporality in a physical realm, which could literally incorporate time:

The CONDITION OF DEATH – of the DEAD,  
[was] RE-CREATED IN THE LIVING,  
TIME-PAST MYSTERIOUSLY SLIPPED INTO  
TIME-PRESENT. (FON 413)

Kantor used theatrical space to stage a revolt against time. He invented a space in which different temporalities could exist simultaneously – through insertion, through containment. Rather than pursue a linear forward progression, his spaces made the present wrap itself around the past. This envelopment is reminiscent of one of Kantor’s own treatments for handling the inanimate object. During his Theatre Informel phase, he developed the technique

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<sup>126</sup> As Pleśniarowicz notes, “Space is one of the basic categories in describing the Kantorian world. Not time...” (270). The importance of space in his work was so fundamental that Kantor once generated a description of his various philosophies/manifestos purely by considering how they made use of the spaces and the objects within them. By discussing the use of “matter” in his various theatrical practices, the ideas behind those practices were, for Kantor, self-explanatory and self-evident (JTOS 118-124).

of “emballage”: the wrapping of an object to demolish its form while preserving its essence. He began to place actors and objects together inside giant sacks, or wrap them up in paper. He wrote that this activity could “bring to mind magic and a child’s play...” At the same time, he called it a “ritual,” which accessed “a domain of sacred knowledge” (FON 156). The act was simultaneously playful and sacred, as tied to the knowledge of childhood as to the rites of funeral and burial. Kantor’s memory theatre was an “emballage” of time itself.

Every production Kantor created from the *Dead Class* on confronted memory along spatial parameters.<sup>127</sup> *Wielopole, Wielopole* took place in the “Room of Memory.” *Let the Artists Die* in 1985 was a “Storeroom of Memories”; *I Shall Never Return* in 1988, the “Inn of Memory.” In each of these forms, the space of memory was as dead as the photographs and mannequins of *The Dead Class*. Like the dead mannequins, the space of memory held malevolent potential in its resistance to our conception:

the room of my childhood  
is a dark WHOLE, which is full of junk.  
It is not true that a childhood room in our memory  
Is always sunny and bright.  
It is turned into such by  
A literary convention.  
It is a DEAD room,  
As well as a room of the DEAD.  
Recalled,  
It dies. (FON 282)

The room is dead, but it dies again as it is remembered. It is revived in order to die anew. The paradox of the memory space is that its resurrection is both impossible and essential. Kantor articulated this challenge, already evident in *The Dead Class*, more thoroughly in his notes for *Wielopole, Wielopole*:

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<sup>127</sup> As noted in Kobialka 2000, 44-45. Intriguingly, the space of the memory seemed to grow broader and more encompassing over time.

It is difficult to define the spatial dimension of memory.  
Here is a room of my childhood,  
Which I keep reconstructing over and over again  
Which is destroyed over and over again. (FON 412)

The memory space necessarily and ceaselessly collapses into inertia and oblivion.

Ironically, it is in this eternal recurrence that it demonstrates the living, evolving, even interactive nature of remembering. Kobialka notes, “[Kantor’s] exploration of spatial, rather than temporal, dimensions of memory drew attention to the dynamic qualities of memories...” (Kobialka 2000 44-45). The memory space is something one does (and undoes), rather than something that simply is. Kantor staged memory as a “pulsating rhythm, which ends in NOTHINGNESS” (FON 413). The cycle of construction and destruction revealed the inherent instability of memory, its fragile and equivocal presence. Ironically, locating memory in the realm of the inanimate reveals its organic evolving presence.

Kantor’s great epiphany shifts memory from our mental landscape into the space and matter which surround us – memory inhabits actual places and objects. It becomes as integral to the soul of a thing as it is to a human, perhaps even more so. It gives its greatest significance to the poor and low objects Kantor so valued. It is memory that rusts the window frame and coats its glass in dirt and grime. Memory stains the walls, and memory eats away at the floorboards. Memory seeps into the body, in aches and pains, in wrinkles and fatigue. Memory is living death; memory is how death lives. Memory grows upon us, like a tumor, which is precisely how Kantor described the mannequins that populated the *Dead Class* – as “parasitic ‘tumors’” (FON 243). The very idea of a tumor combines an excessive and generative life with a malignant and inevitable trajectory towards death: life and death intermixed in an activity of organic growth.



The dolls were not just symbolically bound to the older actors but actually physically intertwined. During the Parade of Dead Childhood:

The Old People, carry them – their own childhood... the dead carcasses of children are hanging over or trying to cling to the Old people not to fall off; others are dragged behind, as if they were heavy burdens, bad consciences, ‘chains around their necks,’ as if they ‘crawled’ over those who got old, and who killed this childhood of theirs with their sanctioned and ‘socialized’ maturity... (FON 242)

Memory and the past congeal in the form of these child-figures, and imbue them with a life of their own.

Like tumors, these incarnations of memory seem sinister – they reek of death. The child figures are clad in black costumes, each corresponding to their respective old person. Their clothing’s simplicity allows it to serve as either school uniform, or funeral attire. The children have very little exposed flesh – only their faces, hands and feet reveal the pale and waxy consistency. Their little eyes stare, black and blank, unblinking, eternally focused. And each is crowned with a wispy head of hair – a cross between straw and dust bunny, which is also what one senses it would smell like. Hair in abundance, unkempt and untended, the sort Shockheaded Peter could easily own. The mannequins are manifestation of the memories of matter; they know everything that their eyes may have seen, even before they were eyes.

Kantor’s mannequins declare their own independent and unknowable existence. They reveal the sort of agency that Jane Bennett advocates in *Vibrant Matter*, her exploration of the inanimate from the perspective of political science. Bennett explores the independent life of things, the way in which objects can have meaning and even affect entirely separately from our human agenda to impart meaning and purpose to them. For Bennett, “following the scent of a nonhuman, thingly power” is part of a political agenda, an ethical mission to unseat the human being from his central position in political philosophy. Kantor’s objects perform precisely that goal – they upstage the humans. Furthermore, they reveal how attending to the

secret life of objects is necessarily an uncanny perspective. It is profoundly disorienting. To look across at an object and truly view it as alive requires that we also be able to look at our living bodies, and see them as objects. Kantor's 'boundary of death' is a kind of mirror – we see something profoundly like ourselves but different on the other side. What sits on the other side of that boundary, gazing back at us across the perverted mirror of Kantor's winding little rope, is not just death, but our own death. Asserting the independent life of objects is thus inextricably linked to the spatialization of memory.

The memory space is equivocal, as Kantor acknowledges, but this indeterminacy does not make it less actually *present* for him. It is not merely a mental space. Rather, the wavering vacillating pulse of the memory space is a felt occurrence, a bodily experience. The girl in the window is herself a microcosm of this embodied memory space in action. Like Kantor on the shore, she stands peering through a window into a remembered classroom space. But she is also simultaneously within that space. Without moving, her body oscillates between these two positions, just as Kantor feels himself divided between creating the room and occupying it. Like the paradox of Schroedinger's cat, the girl is both in one position and the other. Unlike Schroedinger's cat, however, the experience is more than just a thought experiment. Though we may have never seen a body occupy two places at once, we have a visceral knowledge of what it would feel like to be such a body. We even have a name for it – the out-of-body experience.

We feel it sometimes in a glancing moment, when we pass by an unexpected mirror and see a reflection of ourselves where we expect to encounter a stranger – as I did on one of my visits to *Sleep No More*, or as Freud did in the private car of a passenger train.<sup>128</sup> To a

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<sup>128</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3. Another personal example from my own home: we use a baby monitor to keep an eye on the children. For some reason, the monitor sometimes retains the

certain degree, these mistakes are somewhat like optical illusions, in which we are fooled by faulty technology or a misperception. But that does not make the sensation any less potent or carnal. These moments cause a disruption to our proprioception that registers as vertigo. Our legs go weak, our pulse races, and deep within, we feel a void, as though we were being emptied, or turned inside out. Even in more extreme cases, the sensation of being disembodied can still be generated from the body itself. In the book, *The Body has a Mind of its Own*, authors Blakeslee and Blakeslee discuss various cases of documented out-of-body experiences, some of which result from physical trauma to certain regions of the brain. They cite the work of neurologist Olaf Blanke, who has provided evidence for a neurobiological component to these experiences. Blanke was able to generate the sensation of an out-of-body experience in otherwise “healthy” individuals by stimulating a specific region of the brain with an electrical current.<sup>129</sup>

Experiences like these have often been offered as evidence for the existence of a soul, and for the possibility that the soul endures beyond our physical selves. Such understanding stems from a kind of cognitive prejudice, which Jane Bennett critiques, that only something (self)conscious is of value. Kantor’s theatre seems rather to invert those priorities. The Schulzian sentient space that Kantor creates declares that objects have their own form of life, an independent autonomy that must be acknowledged for any kind of reckoning with the dead. Rather than providing some validation for a solipsistic soul, Kantor’s theatre seems to

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image of the last few moments it displayed in a kind of electronic reserve, even after the camera has been turned off. When switched on again, in the first moment that electricity flows, the screen initially presents the residual image. Sometimes that footage is of my own self, tending to the kids or straightening up their room. I have sometimes turned on the monitor, having just left their room, to discover an image of my own body walking about. A second later, the image is replaced with the normal view of their sleeping forms. My doppelganger evaporates, but it gives me chills, every time.

<sup>129</sup> See Blakeslee and Blakeslee, 121-126, for more detail.

validate the body's right to exist without our conscious perception of it. In a theatre that glorifies the inanimate object, removing consciousness from the body is a kind of upgrade. Kantor's theatre creates the feeling of an out-of-body experience, but in reflection. The important question is not what it is like to look down from outside your body, but rather, what does your body see when it looks back at you? It forces us to confront the question of what knowledge our bodies may have that our conscious minds may not.

## Memory in the Body

*Abruptly one student is raised up onto a pew, and stripped down bare. His flesh is exposed like molded clay. The fact that his now visible saggy genitals are made of a combination of fabric and wood does not seem incongruous with the waxy texture of his own arms and legs. Other students also strip and are stripped.*

*Witkiewicz' play continues. The old man playing the role of "Tumor" pulls out a gun and shoots one of the naked men, who collapses into the arms of the double. They carry him quickly to the front of the classroom. The old man with the red beard, who is now also naked, stands up on a central pew. At one point he slaps his wooden cock against a slab of wood to summon everyone's attention (effective).*

In *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*, Jeanette Malkin notes how "the "space" of memory, its circulations and echoings, fit naturally into the spatial art of theater" (ix). She identifies and explores an increasing tendency in postmodern theater to navigate the realm of memory. Unsurprisingly, she ends her study by briefly touching on Kantor.<sup>130</sup> She argues that Kantor's particular approach to memory "[places] particular stress on the body as the site of

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<sup>130</sup> She considers Kantor alongside director and playwright George Tabori. She sees their approach to memory and theater as being in parallel. Both, she writes, "[seek] a stage language through which memory might be viscerally translated" (Malkin 223). Despite the fact that she ends her book with Kantor, Malkin does not consider him postmodern. Rather she argues that his work is "of that modernist tradition" which seeks "for a fuller meaning underlying the fragments," where as she identifies the postmodern as the belief that "the fragments, including the fragments of memory, are all that is available" (223). But Kantor's work embraces precisely this fragmentary nature in memory, and in fact, he valued the fragmentary and the partial in all aspects of his theatre. He actively worked to prevent a receptive synthesis his productions, their lack of cohesion was essential to the fragile magic of séance. If not fully postmodern himself, at the very least Kantor set the stage for the kind of memory theatre that follows.

memory – often detached from the verbally expressive dimension... The dead demand their life again, but more than this, they demand their embodied place within memory” (Malkin 221). She argues that the production validates a kind of knowledge that lives exclusively in the body, beyond the realm of narrative or consciousness.

The kind of memory Malkin refers to is what cognitive scientists would today call “implicit” rather than “explicit” memory. Freud would have used the terms “unconscious” and “conscious” (Solms and Turnbull 148). Though the terms have changed, neuroscience confirms the existence of unconscious memories. We can absolutely have a memory and even act upon that memory without being consciously aware of it. An implicit or “unconscious” memory is necessarily a “bodily” memory – an unconscious “disembodied” memory would be meaningless. We only recognize its existence because of an action or other physical response. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in a case study from Dr. Edouard Claparède. His patient suffered from severe memory loss, to the point that she could never remember Dr. Claparède despite having met him several times. Each time he came to examine her, he had to introduce himself again, as though for the first time. On one such occasion, Claparède concealed a small tack in his palm as he shook the woman’s hand. Alarmed by the prick, she withdrew her hand. Most interesting was her response the next time Claparède arrived to see her. She again did not recognize him and claimed to have no idea who he was, but when he went to shake her hand, she abruptly refused. When asked why, she could not remember the episode of having been pricked, or offer a specific reason for not shaking. Instead, she argued, “Doesn’t one have the right to withdraw her hand?” Even more curiously, she stated the seemingly random fact that, “sometimes pins are hidden in people’s hands.” Her body, it

seems, remembered something that her conscious mind did not.<sup>131</sup> She harbored the visceral memory of pain and the emotion of betrayal in her affective consciousness, even if she could not conjure a recollection of the event itself. Her dysfunctional brain knew enough only to trust her affective memory, and her consciousness then attempted to provide a rational, if implausible, explanation for her behavior.

The bodies in *The Dead Class* were likewise divorced from their own conscious awareness. Within the realm of spatialized memory, the actors became “pure corporeality,” as Pleśniarowicz puts it: “as if their bodies were uninhabited, as if anyone could impersonate them, act instead of them, speak in their name” (Pleśniarowicz 224). The activities in which they engaged – defecation, disrobing – called attention to these actors as bodies, but simultaneously declared their objecthood. Stripping reveals flesh, but also the inanimate materials of fabric and wood which Kantor equates with flesh. They were reduced, or by Kantor’s estimation, *elevated* to the status of matter. In this realm of sentient space and matter, the actor’s bodies were therefore provided with the kind of inherent consciousness that the other objects in the space maintain. In a seeming paradox, the performance granted his actors more consciousness as bodies than they had as individual humans. Kantor’s theatre presents matter and its objects as the physical presence of memory – in objectifying the body, he suggests that it, likewise, has a preternatural access to the remembered past, separate from the awareness of the conscious mind.

### **Dialectical Death – What the Body Remembers**

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<sup>131</sup> The case is discussed in many books of neuroscience and neuropsychology. In specific see Solms and Turnbull 164, and Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh 364, and LeDoux 181 (and is also mentioned in a footnote to Chapter 2).

The students are all seated. One rises and all begin to chant – a series of nonsense syllables, which cause a certain contortion of the facial muscles when uttered. The rhythm accelerates as the students bob up and down in place. A climax, then they wind down, the chant degenerating into elaborate slow motion facial manipulations, mocking, pulling, exaggerating their own plasticity. The students leave their seats and begin to brawl amongst themselves ineffectually. The brawl carries most of them out of the classroom. The few who remain reposition several of the child mannequins in the pews, then exit. The room is still. Kantor walks alone among the dolls, adjusting them and tweaking their positions.

Suddenly, the “cleaning woman” who has been motionless alongside the lectern all this time is summoned to life. She begins her efficient labor. She picks up a hand broom and dustpan, and clears some of the random detritus that has developed around the room.

She attends to the mannequins. One by one, she positions them back in the pews, sitting upright, dead-eyes gazing forward. As she places them, she pauses periodically to check her work, occasionally confirming a position with Kantor. He waits, his face composed into a mask of patient endurance.

Once all the mannequins are in place, she turns her attention to the moldy mildeewy pile of books which lay underneath them. She attempts to organize them on the writing desk of the first pew – a futile effort. After all the books are gathered there, they hold this position for a brief moment before collapsing again into a heap on the floor. She makes no effort to restore this chaos to order.

She crosses to the bailiff and relieves him of his damp newspaper. She wipes it off, takes a seat in the pews, and begins to read the news – old news, it seems, in fragments. “Sarajevo,” “archduke Ferdinand,” etc., and then, in English “At last war is declared!” This summons the bailiff to his feet, who salutes and begins to sing the Deutschlandlied. He then turns and walks out of the back of the classroom. The cleaning woman and Kantor remain alone with the mannequins.

Suddenly unseen voices begin to speak, echoes of the actors who left the classroom some time ago. The cleaning woman rises in some distress, looking around her for the source of the voices. She backs out of the room in increasing agitation, as though it were the mannequins themselves who were speaking. The cleaning woman – paragon of detached drudgery – is afraid of these children. Afraid of the life that still breathes within them, within their silent, expectant, and impassive faces. She scurries away.

‘It is not true,’ Kantor cried, ‘that MODERN man has conquered fear. This is a lie! Fear exists. There is fear of the external world, of what the future will bring, of death, of the unknown, of nothingness, and of emptiness.’ (Pleśniarowicz 292)

In *The Dead Class*, the figure of the Cleaning Woman is instrumental in revealing the actors’ humble corporeality. Though she begins simply enough by tidying up the room, she gradually evolves into an ever more menacing figure. Kantor incorporates this character into the production specifically in order to mortify (in both the sense of humiliate and cause to die) the bodies of the actors:

...It is necessary to expose them to the effects of shame. To strip them bare. To make them all equal as if for the Last Judgment. Worse than that. To bring them to the most discreditable and shameful condition – that of corpses in a mortuary.

It is only THE CLEANING WOMAN – DEATH who can perform this ruthless but indispensable maneuver.

THE CLEANING WOMAN performs her duties professionally and ruthlessly. She enters the stage with a bucket of water and a dirty rag. She washes the corpses, wrings the rag; dirty water drops onto the ground. Stripping the bodies bare, washing their intimate parts, thighs, stomachs, buttocks, feet, faces, fingers; cleaning their noses, ears, groins; a vicious and unceremonious throwing and turning of the bodies. (FON 267)

The cleaning woman performs the duties of janitor, nurse, and mortician. As she washes the bodies with a dirty rag, she “un”cleanses them, transforming them into matter itself. She treats the actors like earth and mud, like broken dolls, and like the dead. In so doing, she converts the live bodies into corpses, countering the production’s animating force.

Her ultimate transformation confirms her connection to the physical and material world:

The successive stages of the metamorphosis of this class janitor from an odious and menacing CLEANING WOMAN, progressively revealing the sharp traits of DEATH, lead to the only possible final metamorphosis in this theatre of death – to a vulgar OWNER OF THE BROTHEL.

Now, with her arse and huge breast protruding provocatively and her lips painted with a perverse lipstick, she is smoking a cigarette –

A vulgar and sensuous face;

An arrogant, but confident, walk;

Her entire figure makes one forget

About nostalgia and a woeful mourning for this performance... (FON 276)

She becomes hyper-sexualized, all drive and perverse sensuality. Her presence declares the stage a brothel and the actors’ bodies as objects available for purchase. She is the antithesis of memory; she is the body without conscious recollection. Her washing of the bodies is equally a matter of washing away consciousness and the self. Kantor specifically says she makes one forget about nostalgia – she makes one forget about memory itself. The cleaning lady thus acts as a kind of balance to the animating energy of memory in the production. As the dead memories, dolls, objects and actors strive for life, strive towards a futile reanimation, her actions negate and oppose those efforts, restoring them to the state of inanimate matter. In



Kantor's pulsating rhythmical memory, she is a necessary counterpoint, returning the remembered to oblivion.

The potential and necessity of forgetting is an integral part of Kantor's memory. Memory is not some pure unadulterated access to the past, but rather a confrontation with threads of recollection within a background of oblivion. Kantor's understanding in many ways anticipated contemporary cognitive science. In his exhaustive and eloquent book, *Searching for Memory*, professor Daniel Schacter synthesizes recent developments from psychology and neuroscience to provide a richer understanding of both how memory works and how it fails us. He writes, "We now know enough about how memories are stored and retrieved to demolish another long-standing myth; that memories are passive or literal recordings of reality" (5). Our memories are no longer simple or trustworthy – or more accurately, they never were. Memory is precisely NOT the simple act of reviewing a mental photograph, and it is especially not so for Kantor. Rather it is the tragic impossibility of such an attempt.

In memory, the pendulum swings from the recalled to the forgotten:

From the photographs of dead memory expressing the 'Illusion of Return' among the schoolroom themes, through the circus-like death in 'alien roles' and the allegorical intervention of Death, there runs a line of memory subjected to amnesia, and therefore sentenced to remaining unfulfilled. Amnesia in the form presented by Kantor lacks the relief of absolute forgetting. It is rather adulthood trying in vain to erase the memory of its own immaturity, while childhood, relegated to the subconscious, tries in vain to resurrect itself in the face of death. (Pleśniarowicz 213)

The cleaning woman embodies the force of "amnesia" that clings to all memory in Kantor's realm. As such, she seems to also enact the role of death – of the "nothingness" and "emptiness" that Kantor above claims we fear. But this fearsome creature is herself afraid – of the child dolls. What could death possibly have to be afraid of? The mannequins are also dead, as Kantor stressed on many occasions. But they are a different kind of death. The cleaning woman is DEATH with a capital D – mundane, dull, brutal, negating OBLIVION.

But the mannequins are *death* – death with agency, clawing its way into our lives, the awareness of oblivion without the mercy of forgetting. They are dialectical death, death that acts upon us and within us. As Pleśniarowicz notes, the amnesia of Kantor’s memory “lacks relief.” It is tainted by incomplete recollection. It is not dangerous to forget – it is dangerous to remember.

Kantor demonstrates that, despite what he writes above, the source of our deepest contemporary fear is not “nothingness” itself, but rather our awareness of that nothingness, as transmitted through memory. It is only through memory, of course, that we even know that something has been forgotten. Memory itself is sinister. In discussing *Wielopole, Wielopole*, he wrote of the dubious and untrustworthy nature in all our memories, “Let us admit openly, that the process of the recollection of the past/ is always suspicious and does not leave one clean” (FON 283). The mannequins, as encrustations and coagulations of that memory, are similarly threatening and dangerous, even to the cleaning woman.

Most perilous are those memories which we retain affectively though they are lost to conscious awareness, whether they have been smudged over by time, infirmity, or dysfunction, or been actively repressed as Freud would have it. Such memories have the power to affect us without our knowledge, and in so doing, to turn us each into puppets, guided by unconscious automatic responses. Where do these forgotten memories live? In the same place that we remember forgetting – in our bodies, in the feeling they create, in our sense of apprehension. But what is the memory that Kantor suggests we have forgotten that we know? What does he see lurking in our affective consciousness, just beneath our skin? Kantor’s theatre declares a terrifying truth: that whatever obscure knowledge objects may have – of death, eternity, oblivion – that knowledge may also be found within our very bodies themselves.

## ***Memento Mori – From the grave to the cradle***

The old people reenter quickly, uttering lines from Witkiewicz' play.

The two doubles exit and get an elaborate contraption – a cross between a gynecologist's examination chair and a torture device. The chair, reclined at angle, features two wooden boards at the front that open and close like stirrups. They grab a female student, and place her inside it, her legs suspended upon the wooden boards. The two doubles each take up a handle at the end of the wooden planks, and spread her legs every few seconds to reveal a black wooden panel positioned just in front of her crotch. The "play" continues.

The cleaning woman enters with another elaborate device, a small wooden trapezoidal box poised on top of machinery – part cradle, part miniature coffin, part sewing machine. She positions it in front of the gynecological chair, below the legs which are splayed open, and sets it in motion. It begins to rock back and forth, and two wooden balls contained within slam from one side to the other, rapping metronomically against the wooden walls with ruthless regularity.

The cleaning woman leaves and returns swinging her push broom over her head like a scythe. The old people scurry to avoid its path, but she relentlessly pursues them, slicing. With each swipe, they collapse, one by one. Once all the students are "down," she leaves.

The cradle continues to rock, swaying with the force of an unseen hand.

The actors continue the "play." The character of "Isla" begins to recite a poem which she can not finish. The cleaning woman returns, and sweeps her down, aborting the completion of her poem.

The cradle continues to rock.

The woman leaves the gynecological chair, and the doubles take it away. The students gather up the mannequins again, and replace them in the rubbish heap in the corner, then retake their seats.

The cradle continues to rock.

By the terms of his own logic, Kantor is still alive. His memory lives on in his work.

The doublings and divisions of *Today is my Birthday* proliferated into the many lingering testaments to his legacy: the extensive archives of the Cricoteka; the films of his later productions; his drawings, sketches, and photographs; and his copious notes and writings. Kantor smirks with immortal self-assurance from behind every picture and page. And his theories and theatre have a continued existence in all productions of uncanny performance, each of which proves itself to be Kantorian, even if only unconsciously so.

Even beyond the metaphorical afterlife he maintains in the archive, his work suggests that Kantor obtains a more literal continued existence. His understanding of memory as an uncanny death in life argues for his lingering presence. Even when he was alive, he was already dead. He spoke of death as though it were a past he just could not quite remember.

His theatre always balanced on the edge of resurrection. Kantor belongs to an alternate lineage of the uncanny for which death is truly only a beginning. This ideology begins in ancient mythologies of death, but has found more recent advocates in patrons of the uncanny such as Jentsch, Schulz, Cixous, and Royle. Kantor's work demonstrates how such an understanding actually subsumes the more limited version of the uncanny proffered by Freud and a strictly psychological approach. Repression becomes but a subset of the ways in which memory threatens us. In the moment we apprehend the uncanny, knowledge mixes with oblivion, awareness with amnesia. Our forgotten memory struggles to return to life, but never fully escapes the realm of the dead. Kantor's performances argue for a reckoning with this full-body experience, one which lives at the unstable intersection between flesh and thought. His undead dolls voicelessly challenge us to look at them. And the abyss looks back at us.

Memory, Death, Death, Memory, they interweave and roll around together like the two balls in Kantor's self-rocking cradle. Perhaps no term is more fitting to describe Kantor's work than one which is built of those same two ideas – *Memento Mori*. Performance Research dedicated the 2010 issue to exploring the concept of *Memento Mori*. In their introduction, Robert John Brocklehurst and Daniel Watt discuss how performance negotiates with mortality. They note, particularly, how the spatial qualities of death align well with the space of performance. "This space of death might be understood therefore as providing us with the same sort of temporal displacement as is effected by performance, for such staged spaces equally disrupt and reorder our encounters with the everyday" (Brocklehurst & Watt 1). Kantor knew this all too well, and seized upon the unique spatial qualities of theater for their ability to access the altered time of the dead.

Unsurprisingly, this issue features a key article on Kantor and his work. In "Of Last Things in *Memento Mori*: Silence, Eternity and Death," Kobialka dwells on Kantor's use of

photography in his art and theater to explore the realm of the dead. Kobialka draws heavily on Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and demonstrates parallels between Kantor's work and Barthes' theories about the photographic image's inherent connection to death. The image, according to Barthes, both "embalms" its subjects, and simultaneously provides a "return of the dead" (Kobialka 2010 131). Kantor's work likewise creates death even as it resurrects. Kobialka suggests that Kantor's practice, like the photographs Barthes so intimately explores, can offer us only a representation of death, and not its reality. True, Kantor cannot provide, and the human mind cannot truly grasp, an experience of undialectical death (until, of course, it does). What his theatre did, however, was inhabit the liminal realm between life and death, which is more than a mere "representation" of death. Kantor's theatre showed that death is in fact, dialectical, and he allowed us to experience it as such. Kobialka describes Kantor's theatre as "a gesture of space-time-matter that surpassed the visible only to locate itself in the aporia between the living body and death" (Kobialka 2010 138). The realm of uncertainty that Kobialka locates between flesh and mortality is exactly where Kantor's equivocal memory resides.

*Memento Mori* – remember death. There are two accepted translations, often viewed as equivalent – "Remember death" or "Remember that you will die." As a command, the word 'remember' points to the future.<sup>132</sup> In the time that has not yet taken place, it cries, do not forget. It is an odd demand, bound up in an awareness of its own fragility. After all, the invocation to remember is something which itself must be recalled. Remember to remember. But remembering also suggests the recollection of something that has already taken place. In Kantor's realm, memory, like time, is neither simple, nor unidirectional. It moves backwards,

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<sup>132</sup> And it is in this sense that Kobialka takes it: "*memento mori* is oriented towards the future" (2010 131).

sideways, and in circles, but rarely, actually forwards. Kantor forces us to consider if there isn't a way in which this "remember" could reach backwards, into the past. Kantor portrays death as something within us always, death as a part of life, death as an ongoing organic process. Rather than death as a noun, as a static event, perhaps it would be better to use a verb. Kantor's theatre combines memory and death in a way that would better be described as "Remember dying." This phrasing allows for the possibility that dying exists for us in the present and in the past, as well as in the future.

Kantor's theatre depicts a world in which death and dying are something we already know. His mortality is not unknown, but pre-known, a knowledge that we have forgotten that we have, like so many other unconscious memories that have slipped beneath conscious awareness. "Remember dying" is not necessarily an invocation towards some future death, not simply an annoying reminder of our current mortality, but a command to look inwards, to ask in what way dying is already within us. And the answer is buried deep within our own bodies. If the knowledge of death lives in our emotional unconscious, it is present in our flesh, in our blood and bones and nerve fibers. Kantor's theatre forces us to confront the question – how can it be that our bodies remember death? What would it mean for us to admit this possibility? In this sense, Kantor converts our very bodily selves into something foreign and beyond our comprehension. He achieves the very sensation Nicholas Royle views as the essence of the uncanny: "[The uncanny] may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body, the very estrangement of inner silence and solitude" (Royle 2) – the quintessential out of body experience.

Death, then, is not the end, but present from the very beginning. Death is a child. Death is a baby – the baby that inhabits the self-rocking cradle of *The Dead Class*. It is fitting that the rocking wooden box was both a cradle and a coffin, and that the baby is portrayed by

two inanimate objects – a pair of wooden balls, which hypnotically slam against the sides of the cradle. That sound is amplified to fill the space like a heartbeat, or the relentless cry of a newborn. In Witkiewicz’s play, the child’s mother, in a rage at her husband’s adulterous urges, throws the baby she so longed for out the window. In *the Dead Class*, the old woman playing the mother shows her anger by removing the wooden balls and shoving them into her husband’s hands. Their sound temporarily ceases, and its absence conveys the death of these already dead spheres of wood. But in the Theatre of Death, dying is but a phase in a horrific cycle, and soon, the sound of the balls returns through the loud speaker. The recording is a dead echo of a sound made by the activation of an inanimate object – it is the corpse of a ghost. When the balls are returned to the cradle shortly thereafter, the recorded sound temporarily overlaps with the actual sound, before fading away. The undead baby returns to its rattling cry. The cradle, its wooden occupant, and the sound of its recorded wailing generate life from pure death, from matter, repetition, and technology. ‘Remember dying?’ they cry.

The cradle continues to rock.

## ***CODA: The Tell-Tale Crypt***

There is a cemetery in Harlem. The Church of the Intercession couches in its midst, surrounded on most sides by grave plots. Bordered by 155<sup>th</sup> street to the north and Broadway to the west, the century old church is clearly visible from the street – its gothic arches and stained glass windows strain upwards over the avenue. What is not visible, however, is the (perhaps not so well kept) secret contained within the church’s viscera – a fully functioning crypt, a cavern of cool and damp stone. In October of 2016, Unison Media partnered with the chamber company On Site Opera to produce the world premiere of a one-act opera based on Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, in this crypt. In addition to their work as a PR firm for classical musicians, Unison Media produces a concert series in the crypt throughout the year to showcase their artists. On Site Opera is perhaps New York City’s most innovative small opera company; their mission is site-specific performances of unusual and unknown works. They strive to marry space and story – just the sort of symbiotic interaction that a Poe opera in a functioning crypt could provide. I was invited to direct.

### **The Crypt**

There are two entrances to the crypt. The main entrance is a heavy double door of wood and iron, accessible only through the cemetery. The door is sealed with locks above and below as well as an iron crossbeam to ensure that trespassers stay out, though one also feels that these measures restrain the contents of the crypt within. Behind these doors, a deep staircase conveys you into the earth, and into the crypt itself. The stone chamber is not particularly large, but nevertheless is difficult to take in all at once. Four heavy pillars divide the room and obstruct sight from almost every vantage point. The result is that the space is



circumscribed and subdivided: nine mini chambers and a single larger chamber all at once. These pillars reach upwards to vaulted ceilings, whose arches somehow seem excessive – as though there are more than necessary. The eye gets lost in the shadows of their web-like complexity. The crypt was used initially to hold bodies awaiting burial, but soon also became the actual final resting place for some. Though it no longer functions as a morgue, the crypt remains active as a columbarium. At one end, two facing walls were converted into niches for cremains. Most are occupied, though some are still available.

The location of the crypt is unexpected. It would seem more appropriate somewhere in Prague than under the streets of New York and yards away from that most prominent subterranean feature, the subway. But the crypt is also unusual in its design. As necessity would dictate, it is a closed and rather claustrophobic space, but the crypt is not hermetically sealed. A number of strange apertures penetrate its perimeter. There is a second entrance, a humbler one, halfway up the main stairs. Approaching the crypt from this side entrance is perhaps even more unnerving precisely because the journey is more domestic and banal. From the church's courtyard, you descend a well-traveled staircase, reminiscent of an elementary school. You cross past a basement rec room whose clutter confirms that mundane impression – metal chairs and a ping-pong table and boxes of plates and party supplies. Across from the rec room, an inconspicuous hall (adjacent to the men's room) leads to a small door. The white concrete hallway, heartily decorated with multi-colored Christmas lights, suggests that the door there would lead to a broom closet, or mop-sink. Instead, the door opens onto an abyss – a staircase dropping off into the blackness. Turn to look back over your shoulder: water pipes, plumbing, and cleaning supplies. Look again in front of you, and find the stairway to Hades. Entering from the cemetery through the massive double doors, one rather

suspects the presence of the cavernous space below. To enter through the side entrance is to fall through a rabbit hole.

Arriving at the base of the staircase, the two columbarium walls are to your left. To the right is a kind of altar, backed by a large stained glass window, which seems particularly odd in an underground structure. The panes of this window are frequently broken or cracked, allowing a view of the other side. Beyond this fragile glass is a small ventilation column. It resembles an oubliette, a forgotten internal space within this already cloistered realm. Due to its depth, the space is rarely touched by daylight, even at midday. Nevertheless, the windows remain, dark and unilluminated and futile.

There are three additional doors found in these walls. Two of them, on either side of the stained glass window, lead to storage closets. Perhaps they made sense when the crypt was actively used as a morgue, but it is hard to imagine they are useful to its current occupants. The church has found them convenient for storing extra platforms and out of season paraphernalia. The third door is similar in appearance to the two closets, but has an entirely different function. Directly opposite to the main doors of the crypt, this third door leads to a bizarre passageway – an unexplained labyrinth. Though I spent nearly 24 hours in the space over the course of multiple days, I was never fully clear on where exactly this passage led. It began as a narrow hallway running parallel to the crypt itself, with three apparent points of egress. But it was made clear to all of us working in the crypt that none of these options led to the outside world – each was in fact a dead end. The door at one end of this hallway seemed to hide additional storage space. The central door closed off an office of some kind. And at the end closest to the columbarium, the hallway turned off into darkness – that direction (where we were strictly prohibited to trespass) seemed to lead to someone's home, though we never saw the resident come or go. The fact that someone might actually

reside in this crawl space behind the crypt gave new meaning to the concept of the “unheimlich,” a literally unhomely home.

Despite these peculiar features, the energy in the crypt is strangely soothing. The air is still and silent. The crypt’s only living occupants (besides whatever brave or unlucky soul may reside down the unexplored hallway) are myriad silverfish that scurry away when the lights are turned on, and they move without a sound. Even in summer, the subterranean space stays cool. Seasons have no effect, nor does the weather, any more than the rain moistens a coffin underground. The grand silence requires stillness from the visitor as well – every sound amplifies and reverberates, and so the room encourages either whispers, or noises of profound purpose.

Though it seems to be a final destination, the crypt is also a place of transformation – an access point, not just to a piece of New York’s secret history, but more potently, to an alternate reality. For many years, it provided a transition from the realm of the living to the land of the dead, a kind of way station for souls. Though today, the people who enter the crypt are either unambiguously dead (the cremains) or alive (the mourners and visitors), the space continues to provide spiritual transfiguration. Its depth establishes a physical division between before and after, much like a tombstone, but one that can be inhabited. Once inside, space and time collide – the crypt contains both the eternity of the dead and the ephemerality of the living within its walls. As such, the crypt can be understood as one of Victoria Nelson’s “grottoes” – caves of sacred and transcendental power. Nelson’s book *The Secret Life of Puppets* is a study of the legacy of such underground and enclosed spaces, which she argues form the intellectual foundation for the genre she identifies as the “grotesque”. As discussed in Chapter Two, her grotesque and my uncanny overlap, but differ in priorities. What we share, however, is here more important – an awareness of the mind-altering potential of space itself. The work

of Edgar Allan Poe conforms to either title – an equal example of either the uncanny or the grotesque. Presenting one of his most uncanny stories in the grotto-like setting of the crypt offered an irresistible opportunity to explore the synergy between narrative and environment.

### **The Heart**

“True! – Nervous...” And so begins Poe’s tale of madness and malevolence, in which a narrator briefly explains his decision to kill an elderly man and the seemingly diabolic circumstances that lead to his own subsequent arrest. The opening of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* epitomizes the carefully crafted atmosphere of the whole story. Its surface of simplicity – two small words joined imperfectly by a dash – actually contains a deep well of tension, ambiguity and paradox. The story begins mid-stream – “True!” is a response to a question we will never hear, from a voice the reader will never encounter. What is the question that was asked to which this word provides an answer? Even in isolation, the word negates itself – for what instills more doubt in the veracity of a statement than stating beforehand that it is “true”? Simply uttering the word introduces the possibility of its contrapositive, and calls into question the validity of anything and everything that follows.

The ambiguity of this initial statement extends throughout the narrative as a whole. The narrator has barely presented his status as “nervous” before he utters a “but,” immediately contradicting whatever assertion is initially being made. We do not know what the unspoken question is, who asked it or for what purpose. More importantly we know little to nothing about the narrator himself, who makes no effort to familiarize himself either to the reader or the “offstage” presence he is addressing. The narrator is an iconic example of what Nicholas Royle terms the “always at least faintly disturbing anonymity with which Poe signs

and seals his first-person fictions” (Royle 153). The opacity of this individual anonymity is increased by many other unanswered questions. Where are we, and for that matter, when?

This avoidance of specificity is essential to Poe’s technique, and representative of his tendency to leave much in question, thus engaging his reader’s imagination.<sup>133</sup> Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic* declares Poe’s work to be nearly iconic of the “uncanny,” though Todorov struggles to make a clear distinction between that category and his primary inquiry. Poe’s stories, he notes, share with all works of the fantastic, “the description of certain reactions, especially of fear” (Todorov 47). Poe intensifies the effect of these reactions by intentionally concealing certain information that could potentially explain away the anxiety. The reader is left in a state of permanent doubt, a “hesitation” that Todorov argues is a necessary condition of the fantastic. That ambivalence, he suggests, is most often achieved through the identification between the reader and the narrator or protagonist of the story. The narrator experiences an anxiety or an ambiguity about the state of the world, which is then passed on directly to the reader. “The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters” (Todorov 31). In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the first person narrative directly aligns the reader with the narrator. The fact that the narrator is ambiguous does not prevent a sense of identification, in fact, the character’s ambiguity invites the reader to fill in any gaps or questions with his own experience and personality. At the same time, because the narrative is formulated as a direct address, the reader feels that he or she is the person to whom the narrator is speaking. In both capacities, as speaker and addressee, we are very much a part of the story – we are entirely ‘[integrated] into the world of the characters.’

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<sup>133</sup> “[Poe] states a preference for leaving ‘much to the imagination – in writing as if the author were firmly impressed with the truth, yet astonished at the immensity, of the wonder he relates...’ (Ljunquist, 10).

The ambiguity and hesitation so salient to producing an uncanny effect are sustained through the intentional intermingling of these three roles: narrator, observer, reader.

Poe matches his general avoidance of precision and information with a seemingly paradoxical ability to provide excessive and minute detail. These two methods – general ambiguity and localized specificity are the dual pillars of his story’s persuasion. The initial ambiguity leaves the story open to varying theories and interpretations, and therefore allows a great suspension of disbelief. The accumulation of certain specific details, on the other hand, supports his narrator’s credibility, however implausible the overall argument.

The narrator assumes much – that we know the relationship he has with the old man, who the old man is, the circumstances that cause them to be living in the same house. He ignores these background questions and focuses entirely on the immediate events leading up to the murder and the night of the murder itself. By the end of the second paragraph, the narrator already expresses his determination to kill the old man, not out of any dislike for his elderly cohabitant, but rather to rid the world of the old man’s “vulture eye” which he feels to be profoundly evil. It takes another eight days (and ten additional paragraphs) before he actually accomplishes the deed. He describes in minutia the watchful nights of hesitation: how he opened the door, how long he would wait before poking his head into the room, how he would spy upon the old man, the mechanism of the lantern that he would use. He explores all these details in profound almost loving familiarity. Night after night, he waits for a certain perfect sequence of events that will make the murder both possible and necessary. The old man must wake up and open his eyes, and the narrator must position a thin beam of light directly over the “vulture eye” and nothing else. Only then can he proceed with the act.

Once these circumstances do come to pass, the narrator dispatches the old man rather quickly. In the moments leading up to the execution, the profound fear generated by the evil

eye becomes enmeshed with the sound of the old man's beating heart, which, in his profound sensitivity, the narrator claims to hear. The heartbeat crescendos to a nearly demonic dimension. It overwhelms the narrator, consumes his every thought, until it seems the immediate cause of the murder is less to close that hideous eye and more to silence the noxious beating sound. The narrator leaps forwards, and smothers the man with his own bed.

The murder is not the end, nor even the focus of the story. The narrator goes on to describe the manner by which he disposes of the body. From the start, the narrator divides the humanity of the old man into isolated elements – an evil eye, a groan, a beating heart. Cutting the body into separate pieces is but the physical incarnation of the fragmentation already begun. He lays the dismembered parts neatly below the floorboards of the old man's bedroom. Officers arrive, and the narrator greets them, confidently. So certain is he that the deed is concealed that he leads them to the room of the crime and invites them to sit, positioning his own chair "just above the body."

Finally, at last, the narrator gets to the point – the reason he has so feverishly been recounting these events and the horror he has attempted to postpone. While he engages the officers in a seemingly mundane and ordinary conversation (of the sort that one might have with homicide investigators at 4 o'clock in the morning), a low and stifled sound begins to intrude. An annoyance, an irritation at first, it grows in volume and menace, until the narrator recognizes it for what it is, what it must be. The heart of the dead dismembered old man has begun to beat anew, under his feet. The officers seem not to hear it, but the narrator shrewdly is able to discern their artifice. They hear and know all, and are simply mocking him with their feigned ignorance. Whatever devilish presence he had sought to eliminate through the murder of the old man is not gone – rather, it has expanded, increased in force, and surrounded him. He sees its evil in the mocking, knowing glances of the officers, and hears it

in the treacherous, thundering sound coming from below. Desperate for silence, the narrator succumbs to the hellish pressure, and reveals all: "Villains... dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – Tear up the planks! Here, here! – It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

With this outcry, the story ends as abruptly as it began, plunging back into obscurity. The reader is left to imagine the officers' response to this declaration. And of course, theirs is not the only response in question. This revelation to the officers, a direct quotation within the narrative, is part of a story within a story. The entire tale, recall, is presented from the start to another party altogether, the unspecified listener/reader whose initial question the narrator attempts to answer. What response would he or she have had to the epiphany, presented as it is, in quotation marks? Crying out in this fashion, the narrator seems to be actually reliving the event – the past event becomes inextricable from the present.

The nesting of tale within tale creates an additional level of ambiguity along the axis of time. The story, which was initially presented as existing neatly in the past, becomes increasingly a present event. The story unfolds to the reader both as an event from the past and a current experience; he or she can connect equally to either temporality. Just as the final exclamation shifts the narrator into the present tense, it also positions the reader there. The confusion with regards to time and the narrator's authenticity carefully sustains the possibility of various interpretations. Perhaps the narrator is simply mad, and this whole series of events takes place in his head. There may be no sound at all, or perhaps it is the sound of the narrator's own heartbeat pounding with adrenaline, or some other natural cause, or it could be a manifestation of the narrator's guilt. *OR*. Or maybe, just maybe, the corpse's heart actually began to beat again, despite having been severed from his head. As the narrator's cries reverberate in the reader's mind, that final possibility, however unlikely, hovers as well



in the air, impossible to disprove. The inability to reduce the story to a single interpretation is the uncanny epitomized.

Todorov suggests that all of Poe's work can be characterized by "an experience of limits." He means this in the sense of the limits of plausibility, that Poe explores the most extreme situations – torture, madness, illness – and the unique conditions that might emerge from those situations. But the idea could apply more literally to Poe's work, to the way in which his stories constantly navigate the realm of liminality – the spaces in-between or just beyond the edges of what we can perceive. The conditions of the Usher family literally rip apart the walls of their home. The torture of the narrator of the *Pit and the Pendulum* is constructed through dark walls and unreliable floors and the razor sharp slice of the swinging scythe. Poe's tales constantly engage with the area underneath and behind, frequently involving bodies (whether alive or dead) sealed behind walls, or as this heart is, buried below. Such bodies always refuse to remain concealed. This liminality even transfers to the critical response to Poe in a tendency to refer to his work in spatial terms – either by addressing the design and construction of his tales as though they were architecture, or in descriptions of his work as "claustrophobic," cloistered, enclosed. In part, it is his very use of ambiguity that creates this enclosed effect. The reader wanders through his tales like the victim of "The Pit and the Pendulum" encountering the borders of a meticulously designed ignorance at all sides.

Nicholas Royle is more direct and specific in his assessment of Poe – it is not merely liminality that characterizes his work, but a specific kind of liminality – that of burial. "Premature burial," Royle argues, "is everywhere in Poe's work" (Royle 159). Royle means the concept of "burial" both literally and figuratively. But the key word in is actually "premature." It is not simply "burial" which fascinates Poe and inspires his prolific writing, but the concept of a "premature" burial, the internment of something not yet dead, or

potentially still living. Though Freud barely considers this phenomenon in his essay on the uncanny, he does admit that for some, the idea would be the “epitome” of the uncanny. Freud somehow manages to present this phobia of being buried alive as the apex of the uncanny effect while simultaneously dismissing it from more than passing consideration (since it does not easily adhere to his theories about repression). This logical flaw is one of several irresistible paradoxes and inconsistencies in his essay – tangled threads I have enjoyed pursuing elsewhere in this dissertation.

Royle uses premature burial and Poe in particular to pick apart Freud’s essay, arguing for the importance (which Freud represses) of this particular formulation of the uncanny. The living dead, the premature burial, the animate inanimate – these themes are to Freud’s uncanny as the old man’s undying ceaselessly beating heart is to Poe’s narrator: a pounding incessant reminder of what repression can not repress. The fear of being buried alive, alongside the parallel phobia of the undead, represents a terror beyond what repression can explain. Perhaps Nelson’s grottoes could better approach the potency of an upturned grave. Royle dedicates an entire chapter of his study of the uncanny to the idea of being “buried alive.” He holds this theme up relentlessly to Freud’s ears, until his psychological explanation itself cries out for mercy, “I admit the deed! Here, here! It is the true source of the uncanny – the dead returning to life!”

### **The Opera**

Transferring this story from the page to the (environmental) stage exposed the distinct capabilities and challenges of the uncanny in theatre. At the time, I was deeply immersed in the content of this dissertation, and I eagerly welcomed the opportunity to explore what Poe’s story could be when transferred into actual space and time. Some of the ambiguity of Poe’s

text would be impossible to maintain in performance. The simplest choices for a theatrical rendering would inevitably convey specific details Poe chose to leave unclear, changing the story's impact upon the audience. The narrator, for example, would necessarily be one individual human standing before our eyes. The obscurity that Poe's text grants this figure in terms of age, appearance, and function would be negated by the reality of a singular person. Such individuality would also limit to a certain extent the audience's ability to identify with this character. The text's delicate balance – by which the narrator speaks both to and through us – would shift heavily away from the vicarious and towards the declamatory. A live narrator would speak overtly *to* us – our ability to see ourselves in this role diminishes when presented with a corporeal alternative. On the other hand, the opportunity to immerse the audience in this act of unholy burial held the potential to literally deepen an uncanny effect.

Composer Gregg Kallor's musical setting called for a mezzo-soprano – a female – in this role. The choice initially surprised me – I had always envisioned the narrator as a man (as demonstrated by the preceding description of the tale). After some thought, however, Kallor's choice began to seem like a confirmation rather than a contradiction of Poe's intentional obfuscation of this figure. Nowhere in the text does it ever specify gender. Having these words said by a woman enforces the very generality of the text, and to a certain degree actually restores a more open interpretation of the story/performance. As the actress performed, she would be of course, a unique individual – at our premiere, Elizabeth Pojanowski provided the singular presence that inaugurated the role. But at the same time, for those familiar with the story (as many are), her performance would be haunted by a male alter-ego – the narrator as most people imagine him, co-present even as he would be irreconcilable with the living performer onstage. Her individuality would not necessarily negate the possibility of this shadow male figure, instead, the performance would create a kind

of cognitive blending of the two, which permits the alternate interpretation even as it represents one particular view. Kallor himself maintained throughout the entire rehearsal process that he would be open to the possibility of a male performer in the role (and the piece would work musically equally well with baritone or mezzo). The appeal of a woman was both her unique vocal quality and the tension her figure could create with a more conventional view of the story.

Though Kallor's choice initially seemed radical, it actually enhanced Poe's penchant for requiring imagination and interpretation from his readers. At the same time, it suggested certain specifics about this character that the creative team had to embrace. A woman performing a role often interpreted as male makes gender an issue, even if that is not the intention. She will convey specific connotations and prompt questions that would not arise in relationship to a male performer. What kind of a woman would be in this type of situation, living and interacting with an elderly man who does not seem to be her close relative? Of the various options that have been suggested for a male narrator – apprentice, caretaker, distant relative, employee, tenant – one in particular seemed likely to apply to a female. In my discussions with composer and performer, the idea of the narrator as some kind of health care professional or home nurse became increasingly persuasive and useful. It brought out an element of the text that is sometimes overlooked – the tenderness and affection with which the narrator speaks about the old man, even as she plots his murder. The character traits associated with this particular profession include the ability to nurture as well as a certain clinical detachment, both of which the narrator expresses. We were able to find parallels for the crime in concrete real world examples, instances of elder abuse and exploitation. The idea tapped into the anxieties provoked when we leave our fragile loved ones (whether the very young or the very old) in the care of a stranger. We began to speak of the narrator's

profession and personal history with increasing specificity – a clarity which was absolutely vital to Elizabeth’s performance, even if it were not essential to the audience’s understanding of the tale.

In fact, we worked to avoid dictating that particular interpretation to the viewer, despite our conviction that the interpretation was effective. I felt strongly that we had to sustain possible alternative theories as best we could, to create the theatrical corollary to the ambiguity so easily sustained in Poe’s story. While such ambiguity in performance would necessarily differ in form and execution and subtlety, it could be equally powerful in generating an uncanny effect. When possible interpretations are left open, the mind will gravitate towards those it finds most frightening or dangerous. I struggled with how to suggest our version without pre-determining the response. The narrator’s appearance, of course, would convey much – I wrestled with the question of her attire. We could have chosen a period costume. Kallor’s libretto is extremely faithful to Poe’s text, including certain quirks of the historical distance and period narrative details; the lantern (a key plot device) remained a lantern, not a flashlight or cell phone. He did not “update” the text in any way. So certainly a period costume could have been appropriate. But in the same way that a man as narrator would have created a more significant aesthetic distance from the performer, a historical costume, I feared, would release the audience from whatever possibility of identification they might have had. I leaned towards something contemporary and present, not in spite of the antiquated text, but rather, in contrast to it. With old words and new clothes, two time periods could be kept in play simultaneously – again, an attempt to explore how far we could push the uncanny tension.

We could have tried a costume that was contemporary, but entirely non-descript, left her in ‘street clothes’ for example. But no matter what outfit we considered, it seemed to carry

some specific connotation or another. I felt a responsibility to choose the look very carefully. I became drawn to the idea of hospital scrubs – a simple costume, with the inherent anonymity of all uniforms. One set of scrubs is pretty much like another, and they would also suggest the health care position inspiring us. I hesitated, out of a fear that they would be *too* specific, *too* evocative. Then I remembered that it is not only health-care professionals who use scrubs – prisoners and patients wear them as well. In the right set of scrubs (neutral, vague), our narrator could be viewed as a prisoner or mental patient as much as a professional health aid. I looked specifically for simple colors and styles that could fit either understanding. As for the actress herself, we stripped her appearance down to the raw and bare – minimal make-up and the simplest hair-style, one which she might have adopted either in a professional capacity, or to which she might have been subjected by the limitations of incarceration. The degree to which we achieved both possible interpretations was evident in the reviews. Only one reviewer explicitly noted the connection to “nurse’s scrubs;”<sup>134</sup> others felt that she looked like a prisoner in an interrogation room, or a madwoman relaying a story either in her own mind, or from the more distant past.

In this way, we worked throughout the performance to both embrace and negate the precise individuality of our performer, to create a theatrical uncanny tension. But her living presence was not the only challenge we faced. The space itself was both a blessing and a potential obstacle. The crypt could in theory have dictated both time and place, become the setting of the story, rather than simply the foundation. This possibility concerned me, haunted me even, in the early days of our rehearsal process. If we were relying on the presence of actual deceased beings in the space to create an atmosphere of anxiety, did that not make our

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<sup>134</sup> “A simple set of scrubs...suggested that her character served as the old man’s nurse” (Patrick).

performance exploitative? Furthermore, focusing too heavily on the crypt *as* crypt seemed to lead in the wrong direction. If we took the environment too literally, it would evacuate other possible interpretations of the space. As one reads the story, the location of the narrator is entirely unclear. He or she might still be in the house where the murder took place, or in an insane asylum, or a prison. Or, quite possibly, in a crypt, there is no reason to believe otherwise. But if the surrounding space of the crypt were to become not just our atmosphere but our actual setting, then only that one interpretation would be possible.

Not that we could ignore our environment – far from it. Part of the reason Kallor chose to create an operatic version of the story was the inspiration of hearing it in this particular venue. But to be most effective, the crypt needed to be a metaphorical, poetic background, rather than a literal one. We wanted to draw upon the crypt's energy as a site of burial, while also tapping into its potential to be the kind of transcendental cave Nelson describes. It could become not just a resting place for the dead, but also a site of eternal return, where the entombed are far from silent, instead striving to be restored to independent life. The crypt therefore was able to bury the audience itself, to enact the sensation of being buried alive. Just as the old man's heart refuses to remain below, the audience could experience the anxiety of longing to return to the surface, until they ultimately emerged upwards into the illumination of moonlight and street lamps.

To convey this sensation of sepulture, the positioning of the audience was key. In a non-traditional theatre, the choice as to where to place spectators and performers was as much ours as it would have been in a black box. We could have placed the audience perpendicular to the main staircase, with their focus towards the stained glass window and altar area. That orientation could have enhanced a religious connotation, and in many ways would have been a more "standard" theatrical orientation. Memorial services are often

performed in this direction, as are many of the crypt's concerts. But the very theatricality would have worked against us – the more the space resembled a theatre, the less the audience would be aware of being “below.” They could have faced the opposite direction, and would have been looking essentially at the columbarium the whole time – again, the wrong emphasis. Or we could have positioned the performance at the base of the staircase, with the audience facing back towards the main entrance. In a sense, this orientation had appeal. The audience would look at our actress and then up the dark staircase behind her towards the heavy wooden doors. The feeling would be imposing. But ultimately, we opted for the opposite position, facing away from the main doorway, into the center of the room. The massive staircase and double doors were still a palpable presence, but from behind the audience, which was more disconcerting. Should anything choose to emerge from the cemetery through that entrance, the audience would not see it coming. The spectators were thus grouped together: broken stained glass window to their right, ashes to their left, weighty doors and dark staircase at their back, and the bizarre third doorway in front of them. The chairs were assembled in rows in a loose semi-circle around a low platform at the center of the room. By inhabiting this central area, we called attention to the shared experience of enclosure between narrator and audience member. Both were surrounded by the crypt.

Our approach to the space was two-fold. First, to sculpt the space to allow multiple interpretations, and second, to enhance the crypt's potential to return the dead to life. With Tadeusz Kantor as a kind of shadow guide, I strove to create not simply a show but rather a kind of séance. If successful, the performance would bring to life not the actual spirits inhabiting the columbarium (at least not intentionally) but rather, the space itself. Its walls and doors and inexplicable windows, its secret crevices and corners – these, I argued, were the veins and arteries of this space, which the opera should cause to vibrate and pulse.



As in Plato's allegoric cave, our main tools were light and dark and that product of their unholy congruence, the shadows. Lovers of the uncanny love the dark. As a director, I tend to linger more than most in the realm of shadows. I prefer lighting designers who would rather turn lights off than turn them on. Truth be told, we just couldn't have too many lights, even if we'd wanted them. The crypt had severe power limitations – how much light do the dead really need? Any time we considered adding an instrument, we ran the risk of shorting out the entire space. So less light was as it had to be, both in spirit as well as practicality. The majority of the performance was done in the illumination of a single floor lamp. One light bulb. When he initially described the piece to me, Kallor said he was trying to recapture the chill of a ghost story told around the campfire. And *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a ghost story – as much for the narrator as it is for the reader. The floor lamp was focused on our singer from a diagonal position, which meant that as she moved, her face would shift in and out of shadow. Her expression would at times be inscrutable to the viewer, a feeling not unlike watching illumination flicker on the faces of those gathered around a fire. The light shone across the singer and then cast a fading path of illumination over a small portion of the crypt – the rest faded into black obscurity. We added an absolutely minimal amount of light on the two other musicians – just a dim sliver of sidelight for the pianist.<sup>135</sup>

The opera, or “musical short story” as Kallor prefers to call it, is indeed short – only about 20 minutes long. To fill out the performance, we included some of his other compositions presented as a standard concert experience. (Or at least, as standard of an experience as one can have in a crypt. In this case, the crypt is the venue for an entire concert series every year, so it is not perhaps as odd as it might otherwise seem, but still.) When the

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<sup>135</sup> The cellist played by the illumination of his ipad, which doubled as his score. He himself turned off its glow when necessary to establish complete darkness.

opera itself began, we shut off all the lights, plunging the audience into blackness. Then, the secret door at the back of the crypt, behind the performers – the one which by all appearances should have led nowhere and which had gone more or less unnoticed until now – began to glow from behind. It swung open, seemingly on its own, with an authentic creak that sound engineers would have struggled to recreate. No one had been seen to use the door before, or would use it again after. Elizabeth, our mezzo, then emerged into this backlight, as though she had been hidden there always. She crossed forwards and took her seat on a small platform in front of the critical floor lamp. The door (again seeming to move independently) swung shut, and its glow faded. The lamplight came up slowly to illuminate her face, as the music began. Two low vaguely dissonant pulses from deep in the piano – a heartbeat. And then, she began to sing. “True, nervous....”

The first half of the performance, like the story, is simple, straightforward even. A murder is considered, plotted, executed. The murder forms the pivot point of the opera, which is essentially in two sections. Kallor’s version shares even less detail about the actual event than does Poe’s. At the end of the first half, the narrator hears the hideous pulsing of the old man’s heart, the sound that infuriates her and catapults her into the actual deed itself. She cries, “The old man’s hour had come!” and then says no more, as the music crescendos to a passionate climax. The music performs the murder – she does not have to do more than imagine and remember it. Then this music too, dies away – the murder thus complete, the piece evaporates into an almost hypnotic chill in the upper register of piano and cello (music thematically associated with the old man’s “vulture eye”), which grows quieter and quieter, until the cello completes the thought with a simple three-note phrase. The notes are the same as the one sung initially by the mezzo, at the opening of the piece: “True, Nervous.” Then silence.

At the moment of the murder, the lamp on her face dimmed away to nothing for the first time in the performance, leaving her expression entirely to our imagination. For a while, she remained silhouetted by the light of the pianist and cellist behind her as their playing crescendoed and climaxed. As the music then faded away, so did any remaining ambient light in the crypt. We shut off even the light on the musicians who proceeded to play in near total darkness. At the last second, just as the audience might have grown uncomfortable with the blackness, a razor thin slice of light fell onto one of Elizabeth's eyes; the source, a single unit from behind the audience which served only this purpose. The moment was a reflection of the gesture she describes in the story, by which she would open her lantern a crack to allow a ray of light to fall upon the eye of the old man, the eye which she had determined to shut forever. At this moment, the light fell onto her own eye from a non-descript and unexpected vantage point. She herself, it seems, was being watched, but who or what was watching her? In the moment the light fell upon it, her eye moved in desperate nervous agitation. She looked out towards the audience but saw nothing. For a brief but also infinite moment, audience and performers hovered in silence and darkness, a tenuous balance hinged at the intersection of eyeball and lightbeam. Then this light too was extinguished, but the performance continued.

The lamplight slowly restored as she resumed her tale, growing increasingly giddy with relief at having accomplished the task, and also somewhat frantic to conceal it. As she described the next events – stashing the body, the arrival of the officers – the music increasingly depicted these events as happening in the moment. And then, the unthinkable, the impossible, the truly uncanny event begins. To her horror, as she is chatting with the officers in the old man's bedroom, the heart begins to beat again. This is the point the story begins its shift from being entirely in the past tense towards seeming increasingly immediate. The heart begins its relentless and impossible resuscitation. In the crypt, the space itself began

to speak. As the narrator realizes the noise she is hearing is “not within her ears,” a number of secret lights concealed throughout the crypt began to glow, a slight, subtle pulse that at first might not have been noticed. But as the sound of the heartbeat grows more menacing and more present, so too grew the intensity of these lights in the crypt. Red pulsing light emerged from underneath the doors, from outside the stained glass window, from under Elizabeth’s platform, even from grates in the walls themselves. The crypt itself became a pulsing throbbing organ, an inorganic flesh enveloping both audience and performance.

The introduction of these lights was intentionally subtle and slow – not every audience member would have even been aware of them initially. Those who noticed might not have known what they were seeing – one person remarked afterwards, “I thought maybe I was hallucinating...” But their pulsations became stronger and more frequent, growing along with the sound of the devilish heart beat itself, until the entire crypt was enveloped in crimson. As the narrator cries out in desperation – “It is the beating of his hideous heart!!!!!!” and reveals the heart below, the pulsing of the light climaxed and then ceased. The walls of the crypt receded back into the darkness, leaving the narrator, breathless and broken and once again illuminated by nothing other than the single floor lamp.

Kallor ends the piece with one final gesture, a musical intervention into the story’s resolution. Unlike the story, the final sounds of the piece are not the narrator’s cries. Instead, we hear three low pulses from the piano – the same heartbeat pulse which began the piece. The end returns us to the beginning. This was not the first time the narrator has told this tale, and it will not be the last. Kallor’s uncanny echo extends and completes the sense of claustrophobic enclosure – we are trapped not only in space, but also in time. This ending adds one final layer of horror to the tale – the possibility, necessity even, of endless repetition. The narrator and the audience share a tragic realization – the heart will never be silenced.

Blackout.

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