Night of the Unexpected: a Critique of the 'Uncanny' and its Apotheosis within Cultural and Social Theory

Since 1995, when Martin Jay cautioned against the rise of the uncanny as a 'supercharged' word, the *unheimlich* has not ceased to make itself at home across a range of disciplines including cultural studies, history, politics, ethics, aesthetics and sociology.[1] Works applying the concept have included *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1994); *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (1999); *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (2007); *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (2008); *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline and the Political Uncanny c. 1780-1848* (2009) and *Queer Uncanny* (2012). There are of course different critical tendencies represented here and the uncanny is frequently linked to satellite terms ('spectre', 'ghost', 'haunting') which are in some cases used interchangeably (Bergland's *The National Uncanny* is concerned with American Indian 'ghosts', while Derrida suggested his *Spectres of Marx* could have been subtitled 'Marx – *Das Unheimliche*').[2] However, the net effect has been to promote a new syntax of interpretation aimed at disturbing the boundaries of 'conventional' historical, cultural and sociological analysis.

It is hard not to note an imperialising aspect to this success. Uncanny theory tends to break down the boundaries between itself and other cultural theories, to absorb them into the uncanny. According to Nicholas Royle, the queer is uncanny,[3] psychoanalysis is uncanny,[4] while the uncanny is a way of 'beginning to think about culture, philosophy, religion, literature, science, politics *in the present*'.[5] If all critique challenges boundaries, runs the underlying assumption, then all critique – all theories of alienation, repression, or 'otherness' – are or should be uncanny. But the researcher wanting not merely to extend this form of theorisation, but to challenge, or take stock of its implications, is poorly served. In the first place, the emphasis in uncanny criticism has been on its ubiquity and irreducibility. Royle's *The Uncanny*, which more than any other work put uncanny studies on the map, was an exercise in demonstrating the sheer uncontainability of the concept, while for Anneleen

[1] Martin Jay, 'The Uncanny Nineties', *Salmagundi*, 108 (Fall, 1995), p20.
[2] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, London, Routledge, 1994, p174.
[3] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* , Manchester University Press, 2003, p43.
[4] Ibid., p24.
[5] Ibid., p22.

Masschelein, it 'affects and haunts everything, it is in constant transformation and cannot be pinned down'.[6]

Masschelein's work is the most comprehensive attempt at a genealogy of uncanny theory, and yet, though she acknowledges the concept underwent a fundamental transformation in the 1990s, she chooses 'not to focus on the heyday between 1980-2000', instead filling in its anterior life in criticism from the early-twentieth century up to the 1970s.[7] But this leaves us with something of a phantom genealogy. For Masschelein, the uncanny is throughout 'the Freudian uncanny' (this assumption is typical in the literature), yet she acknowledges, rightly, that it can no longer be considered a psychoanalytic concept and 'one may even wonder if this was ever the case'.[8] Despite an ever-growing corpus on the 'psychoanalytic uncanny', the 'uncanny' is not a theoretical concept within psychoanalysis itself. It has no entry in Laplanche and Pontalis' *Language of Psychoanalysis*, Charles Rycroft's *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* or Stephen Frosh's *Key Concepts in Psychoanalysis.*[9] A surer narrative might trace the impulse within contemporary theory back to Derrida's work and to deconstruction – this is particularly so for Royle, who gives Derrida a major presence within his overview of 2003. And yet, whatever emerges as a more autonomous uncanny or spectral theory in the 1990s is greatly shifted from that which went under the name of deconstruction in the 1970s-80s.

Rather than tracking the 'psychoanalytic uncanny', then, this article concentrates on that watershed in order to probe the nature of the shift, and reflect on the influx of new elements which have given the uncanny its characteristic impetus within the contemporary scene. Crucially, what is neglected in the association of the uncanny with both psychoanalysis and deconstruction is the input from Heidegger, which fundamentally inflected Derrida's own turn to spectres at this point, and turned the uncanny from a more 'contained' concept to something approaching a 'counter-ontology' of human culture – paradoxically, the very stuff of life. For Royle, the 'logic of haunting and ghosts' is the 'very condition of thinking and feeling'.[10]

---

[6] Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2011, p2.
[7] Ibid., p6.
[8] Ibid., p4.
[9] See also Samuel Weber, 'Uncanny Thinking', in *The Legend of Freud,* Stanford University Press, 2000, p20: 'the uncanny remains a marginal notion even within psychoanalysis itself'.
[10] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p53.

I will also examine the way the uncanny began to be mobilised on cultural and sociological terrain as a specifically ethical or political tool: a site of historical mourning or sociological resistance. In the same decade in which its fortunes took off as a critical discourse aimed at the subversion of cultural and conceptual and hegemonies, something else was also promoted, uneasily redolent of a sublime ontology, a new eschatology: 'This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being… It would harbour within itself… eschatology and teleology themselves.'[11] Again, the influence from Heidegger was significant but has been under-theorised. In all the clamour over the inherently disturbing and in-coercible logic of the uncanny (what could be more subversive than a fusion of Freud, deconstruction and Gothic horror) there has been little analysis since Jay of its potentially reactionary function within contemporary cultural theory.

What travels under the banner of uncanny cultural or social theory has become increasingly abstract or transcendental, increasingly estranged from the 'particular' (despite claims that the uncanny allows the ghost of lost or absent particularities to resonate from beyond the historical or sociological grave); and increasingly depoliticised (this, despite claims from the early 1990s onwards that the uncanny had absorbed both Marx and Benjamin; that it epitomises what is salvageable or ultimately progressive in those radical traditions). Though there is no space here to explore the full historical context of this development, I will suggest that the major shift in the fortunes of the uncanny – its popularity, its disciplinary spread, its bolder theoretical pitch – took place very specifically in this context of the rewriting of the theoretical map of Marxism at the end of the 1980s, though the significance of this moment, and the turn to Heidegger at precisely this point, has increasingly been lost in the attempt to roll the logic of the uncanny further and further back across history, as a phenomenon without beginning or end.

II

As a way of approaching the transformation of the concept in the late-80s, I want to go back to the 1970s to examine two new strands of interest in the uncanny which emerged at that time – both at this point linked to deconstruction – and which might seem to indicate

[11] Derrida, *Spectres*, p10.

something of its future direction in cultural theory. However, what seemed uncanny before the concept turned 'spectral' had a markedly different function in critical discourse compared with the situation later on. The first example is the increasing attention paid to Freud's 1919 essay '*Das Unheimliche*' ('The "Uncanny"') which presents an analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale 'The Sandman'. Instead of developing a specific 'uncanny theory', Freud used the investigation of uncanny incidents (particularly Hoffmann's macabre theme of a Sandman who tears out children's eyes) as a way of informally approaching the concepts of repetition compulsion and castration anxiety, feeling his way towards a theorization of the death drive which arrived the following year with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. During the 1970s and 1980s, a cluster of 'returns' and renegotiations of this text emerged, primarily in France from theorists influenced by Derrida, including some footnotes in Derrida's own 'La double séance' (1970) which provide some of the earliest examples of this kind of renewed engagement with the uncanny in theory. Other examples are Hélène Cixous' 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche'*, originally from 1972,[12] and Sarah Kofman's 'The Double is/ and the Devil: The Uncanniness of *The Sandman (Der Sandmann)*' (1974) which reverses Freud's reading, so that Hoffmann's theme of losing one's eyes is not about symbolic castration, but about the escape from a world of artistic mimicry towards the vitality of the sexual.[13] Another is provided in Neil Herz's 'Freud and the Sandman' which addresses 'the rivalry between literature and psychoanalysis' and 'the power of one to interpret and neutralize the other'.[14] Hoffmann's text, for Herz, is in part a parody of the tropes of Romantic fiction, but Freud represses all those aspects of Hoffman's tale that point up its nature as a rhetorical performance. All these articles return to Freud's 'The Uncanny' in order to give counter-readings or meta-interpretations, and to redefine the balance of power between psychoanalysis and other disciplines (philosophy, literature, aesthetics), but they do not yet develop an 'uncanny' theory.[15]

My other example is from the circle of literary critics based at Yale, for whom the uncanny emerges not as a Freudian text, but as a banner for an American school of deconstruction,

[12] Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', in *New Literary History*, 7, 3, 1976, pp525-48.
[13] Sarah Kofman, 'The Double is/ and the Devil: The Uncanniness of *The Sandman (Der Sandmann)*', in *Freud and Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
[14] Neil Herz, 'Freud and the Sandman', in *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.
[15] For an extensive review of the history of deconstructive readings of Freud's essay, see Morten Bartnaes, 'Freud's 'The "Uncanny"' and Deconstructive Criticism: Intellectual Uncertainty and Delicacy of Perception', *Psychoanalysis and History*, 12, 1, 2010, pp29-53.

with no overt connection to psychoanalysis at all. In a series of essays of the mid- to late-70s (particularly a couple of articles on Wallace Stevens' poem 'The Rock') J. Hillis Miller started to use the categories 'canny' and 'uncanny' to define two different kinds of criticism.[16] Miller himself, along with Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartmann and Derrida are defined as uncanny critics, while Socrates is the emblem of canny criticism which follows 'agreed-upon rules of procedure and measurable results' and whose latterday proponents are semioticians such as Genette, Barthes and Jakobson.[17] This terminology was taken up by Hartman in his Preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), and again by Christopher Norris in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1991).

Interestingly, Miller's description of the uncanny not only differs from Freud's but jars with the way the uncanny is theorised in the post-90s and has generally been written out of that history, even for theorists, like Royle, keen to establish links with deconstruction. Part of the reason for the absence of Miller on the contemporary scene is the formalist bent of his criticism. For Miller, there are various key figures or tropes in Stevens' poem 'The Rock' – a pair of lovers, the natural cycle, and so on – but it is impossible to tell which one the poem is actually about. 'Each scene is both literal and metaphorical, both the ground of the poem and a figure on the ground... in a fathomless *mise en abyme*.'[18] This ambiguity is extended beyond the poem to confound the practice of criticism per se. The attempt to escape from words to something more ontologically substantial – a viewpoint from which one might ground an understanding of experience – fails, as each potential framework dissolves in the uncertainties of interpretation. It is this 'perpetual reversal' or 'oscillation', in which points of solidity become points of groundlessness, and vice versa, which Miller asserts as the central motif of uncanny criticism.[19] Theirs becomes a 'labyrinthine attempt to escape from the labyrinth of words'.[20] 'Labyrinth' and '*mise en abyme*' were the insignia of the uncanny in deconstruction before the advent of spectres and haunting. A similar anxiety about impasse crops up repeatedly in Derrida's work of the 1980s, but in *The Post Card* it is a problem from

[16] J. Hillis Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, I', *The Georgia Review*, vol. 30, 1, 1976, pp5-31, and 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', *The Georgia Review*, vol. 30, 2, 1976, pp330-348.
[17] Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', p335.
[18] Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, I', p17.
[19] Ibid., p9, p18.
[20] Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II', p336.

which he seeks to distance himself: 'I have never wanted to abuse the abyss, nor, above all, the *mise "en abyme"*. I do not believe in it very much'.[21]

The point about both these 1970s manifestations of the uncanny is that they remain within a world of distinct but undecidable positions. For Miller, the suspense of meaning oscillates between specific alternatives (as 'reversal, interchange, doubling').[22] Similarly for Herz, Freud's *Unheimliche* is an instance of 'the uncanny' because the story shifts back and forth between the registers of the psychological and the literary (his image for this is, once more, the *mise en abyme*, which simulates 'wildly uncontrollable repetition').[23] However, a few things happened in the late 1980s which start to redefine the uncanny as a theoretical tool, and give it a new impetus which will lead beyond both psychoanalysis and deconstruction towards a new uncanny theory.

The new element that enters in is firstly the language of the phantom, the spectral the ghostly, canonized in Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994). In Hillis Miller and in Herz there is nothing 'ghostly' about the uncanny. But equally, ghosts were not so central a motif in Derrida's earlier work – they are barely present in *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, or *Margins of Philosophy*, while *The Post Card*, published in 1987, still has relatively little to say about ghosts, even where it is concerned with Freud, repetition and revenance. Exceptions must be made for Derrida's dialogue with the work of Abraham and Torok (going back to an early version of his Foreward to their *The Wolf Man's Magic Words*, published in *The Georgia Review* in 1977), and for his performance in Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance* (1983) in which he lectures on Abraham and Torok's concept of the phantom, and states that cinema is the 'art of ghosts' (there is now a whole sub-genre of uncanny literature devoted to the experience of film, including *Uncanny Bodies* and *The Uncanny Gaze*). However, Derrida's comments very much link such phantoms still either to psychoanalytic theories of mourning, or to the technology of image production. Again, the uncanny does not yet constitute a 'general' theory. Yet by 1993 Derrida could say 'the logic of spectrality' is inseparable from 'the very motif... of deconstruction'.[24]

---

[21] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p304.
[22] Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, I', p9.
[23] Herz, 'Freud and the Sandman', p112.
[24] Derrida, *Spectres* , p178, also quoted in Nicholas Royle, 'What is Deconstruction', in Nicholas Royle ed. *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, Basingstoke, Palgrave , 2000, p5.

In the same period, the link with the spectral coincided with increasing attention paid, in literary and cultural criticism, to the aesthetics of the sublime and to the Gothic (Terry Castle's *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, and Peter de Bolla's *The Discourse of the Sublime* are indicative texts). As the uncanny cross-fertilised with Derrida's 'ghost' and 'spectre' (and marginally with Torok's 'Notes on the Phantom', translated into English at this time) it started to absorb more and more associations from Gothic literature. Cultural theory experienced something of a tectonic shift whereby theory itself turned 'Gothic', and tropes from gothic literature and weird tales (vampires, zombies, phantoms) started to function ambiguously not as objects for interpretation but as themselves theoretical tools useful in undermining the distinction between the symbolic and the literal, phenomena and their conceptualisation. Behind this one might also discern an impulse to emancipate cultural theory from its dependence on historicist, political, sociological or philosophical paradigms, and to develop the uncanny as a truly 'home-grown' meta-theory which could be promoted beyond literary and aesthetic studies as a transformation of cultural theory in general.

From this constellation of trends there also emerged a growing connection to the sublime in the Burkean sense – the sublimity which attaches to representations of obscurity and excess, the strange and the unexpected – and this manifests a significant shift in the theoretical idiom of the uncanny. The emphasis on the ghostly and the obscure *within theory* (rather than as objects of literary analysis) radicalised the attempt to escape the boundaries of formalism and specificity in criticism. Unlike the *mise en abyme*, the uncanny no longer succumbs to the impasse of describing itself too completely. The spectral, for Julian Wolfreys, is 'irreducible to any formal description'.[25] Ironically, one of the accusations which Derrida directs at Francis Fukuyama in *Spectres of Marx*, is that 'he oscillates confusedly between two irreconcilable discourses',[26] – that is to say, the former description of uncanny criticism by Miller, now becomes something to be repudiated from the vantage of the uncanny as spectre.

Finally, the shift of the uncanny towards the spectral coincides with a much stronger association between the uncanny and modes of *temporality*. Deferral, from early on, was an issue for reflection in Derrida's work, forming part of the condition of *differance*, while

[25] Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pxiii.
[26] Derrida, *Spectres*, p63.

considerations of *Nachträglichkeit* in psychoanalysis go back to Freud's first works on hysteria. However, such temporal concepts are now reworked as part of a general uncanny/spectral paradigm which thereby acquires a broader ontological cast. This shift is most clearly visible in Derrida's work of the early 90s in which a set of gothic tropes are united with different tense structures to yield a set of uncanny temporalities: *revenant* (both 'spectre' and 'that which returns'); *déjà vu* (uncanny anteriority – 'The Uncanny is what will have come back');[27] 'time-out-of-joint' (a phrase haunted by the ghost of Hamlet's father); and '*l'avenir*' (both the future and the spectral sense of what is to come – 'The future can only be for ghosts').[28] It is on the basis of these temporalities that Derrida will reconceptualise history, ethics and justice in terms of 'haunting'.

These shifts in emphasis come across in many of the readings of Freud's '*Das Unheimliche*' after the late-80s, which become noticeably more radical and more concerned to elicit – not the death drive, or Romantic irony – but the uncanny itself, as a condition of all theorisation. For Samuel Weber 'The Sandman' marks the spot where 'presence and absence' can no longer be clearly distinguished, while the uncanny 'happens' according to a temporality that distinguishes it from the closure of empirical events.[29] For Julian Wolfreys, 'The uncanny is thus uncanny in itself', and 'Freud's discourse can in no way control its haunting or spectral condition';[30] and for Royle, Freud's article 'keeps trying to lay certain ghosts to rest, but they keep coming back'.[31]

III

What is the significance of this shift towards the spectral and the historical (deconstruction for Royle is now 'uncanny history')?[32] What changes does this bring about in the function of the uncanny? Much of it, as we have seen, hinges on tendencies in Derrida's work – according to Wolfreys, the whole turn to the uncanny as 'spectral' is arguably because of *Spectres of Marx*.[33] And yet this does not make it a tendency being carried forward from deconstruction where, as we have seen, the 'uncanny' is implicated in tropes of

[27] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p128.
[28] Derrida, *Spectres*, p37.
[29] Samuel Weber, 'Uncanny Thinking', pp20, 26.
[30] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, pp15-16.
[31] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p51.
[32] Ibid., p120.
[33] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p9.

undecideability, the labyrinth and *mise en abyme*; nor is it primarily a function of Derrida's interest in Abraham and Torok. Rather, Derrida's new invocation of ghosts and revenance coincides with an increasing accommodation to the work of Heidegger. It is Heidegger's use of the word *Geist* that is the central subject of 1987's *Of Spirit*, and he is a guiding presence throughout *Spectres of Marx*, in which Derrida repeats a phrase from *The Post Card*: 'Freud and Heidegger, I conjoin them within me like two great ghosts'.[34] Royle, Masschelein and many others note this joining of Marx and Heidegger in *Spectres of Marx*, and count Marx and Heidegger serially in their list of uncanny authors, alongside Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. But the significance of this turn from Marx *to* Heidegger in the context of the early 1990s has been greatly underplayed.

There is another tradition of the uncanny coming to the fore here which has a quite different context from that of Freud, and this is Heidegger's *Unheimlichkeit*, which already in *Being and Time* is used to evoke a primordial experience of alienation within mass culture. *Dasein* [being there] has lost the 'authentic potentiality for Being its Self' insofar as it has fallen into the world.[35] Knowledge of this fall has itself been covered up by allowing oneself to be immersed in the 'groundlessness of the inauthentic being of the "they"', where the 'they' stands partly for 'public conscience', the mass, the norm.[36] In this condition one may hear the call [*Ruf*] (modelled on a religious calling) which is a call 'to one's *own self*'.[37] The caller is '*Dasein* in its uncanniness', that is, an inner recognition that one is primordially 'not at home' in modern mass society.[38] But it is during Heidegger's lecture courses of the 1930s and 40s – the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), the lectures on Holderlin's hymn '*Der Ister*' (1942), and on Parmenides (1942-3) – that the uncanny moves centre-stage. In all these texts Heidegger draws an account of ontology from the second choral ode in Sophocles' *Antigone* which begins: 'Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing / beyond the human being prevails more uncannily'.[39]

[34] Derrida, *Spectres*, p196. Weber's 'Uncanny Thinking' also provides a reading of Freud's *Unheimlich* alongside Heidegger; cf. Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, pp15-18.
[35] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962, p220.
[36] Ibid., pp223, 334.
[37] Ibid., pp314-317.
[38] Ibid., p321.
[39] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996, p52.

Even though an 'uncanny' critic like Hillis Miller alludes to Heidegger (in the essay on Stevens he describes the paradoxical structure of the poem as 'in fact the traditional metaphysical structure of *alethia*, the appearance of something visible out of the abyss of truth'[40]) there are features of Heidegger's uncanny which seem rather remote from whatever was going on at Yale in the 1970s. Firstly, Heidegger places great emphasis on the uncanny as the 'violent' and 'powerful'. This uncanny is excessive and sublime (which greatly facilitated the links to be made between the Heideggerean uncanny and tropes from Gothic fiction in the 1990s).[41] *Deinon* (the Greek word Heidegger translates with *Unheimlich*) is the terrible 'in the sense of the overpowering power which compels panic fear'.[42] Secondly, for Heidegger, something far more positive was intended than simply that which eludes formal representation. The uncanny in these lectures of the 1930-40s is a description of the 'essence' of the human [*Menschenwesens*, *Wesensgrund*]: essence both because the human being is the 'uncanniest of the uncanny',[43] but also because this vision of man as the uncanny has a foundational place in Western culture as Heidegger understands it. Heidegger talks about 'greatness of historical will', and suggests 'the beginning is the strangest and mightiest'.[44] There is, then, something decisive, foundational, constitutive about this uncanny, which goes far beyond Miller's troubling of the formal boundaries of critical interpretation – it in fact compensates for the latter's 'undecideability' with a sense of the excess required for decision itself.

For both Heidegger and Derrida the uncanny or spectral *exceeds* the present and the familiar. It is disturbing but also generative, existing beyond representation perhaps, but able in some ways to constitute experience, or function as reality's sublime and inaccessible source. Thus Derrida appeals to *l'avenir* (the uncanny future) as that which 'overflows… the entire field of being and beings, and the entire field of history',[45] and also to the 'irruption of a future that is absolutely non-reappropriable'.[46] Though it might be hasty to interpret this irruption directly as a historical 'force', it foregrounds a notion of historical grounds and historical potential. For Heidegger man is 'the most *unheimlich* of beings because he harbours such a beginning

[40] Miller, 'Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, I', p20.
[41] See Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p8: 'The gothic is clearly always already excessive, grotesque, overspilling its own boundaries and limits'.
[42] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p149.
[43] Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, p.68.
[44] Ibid., pp143, 155.
[45] Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, Cambridge, Polity, 2001, p20.
[46] Ibid., p21.

in which everything all at once bursts from superabundance into the overpowering'[47]. For Derrida, there is a 'violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, displaces it out of its natural lodging'.[48]

What I want to suggest is that the tropes of temporality start to push the theory decisively away from the scepticism of deconstruction as a critical practice and more towards a sublime and enigmatic counter-ontology which might form the basis for new representations of history and culture: a counter-ontology, because different modes of time become repositories for qualitatively different experiences: 'the unforeseeable, the incalculable, indeed the impossible'.[49] Sometimes 'beyond' is conceived as a general displacement within presence, more akin to the notion of *differance*. But more often than not it is understood to be another 'dimension' or opening, dis-junct from the present and breaking into it unexpectedly. The idea of the spectre escapes, writes Wolfreys, 'even as its apparitional instance arrives from *some other place*'.[50] Deconstruction for Royle becomes '*the opening of the future itself*, a future which does not allow itself to be modalized or modified into the form of the present'.[51] These formulations are all rather different from the more formal and ahistorical 'fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself' of an earlier phase.[52] The future and the past are sites of loss and expectation, ontologically undergirding our world, in secret communication with each other, but for the moment inaccessible or unrepresentable for us.

Much of this way of temporalising and structuring the uncanny, insofar as it has become prevalent as 'uncanny theory' (particularly under Royle's influence) comes from Derrida; it is the *leitmotif* of *Spectres of Marx*, the essay which advances 'into the unknown of that which must remain to come': 'what stands in front of it (Marxism) must also precede it like its origin'.[53] But Derrida has in turn taken over many of these temporal tropes directly from Heidegger. In Heidegger's seminars on *Der Ister*, for instance, 'Intimating, and especially those who are full of intimation, extend and proceed simultaneously into what is coming and what has been…'[54] The Ister commentary is one of a series on Holderlin's late hymns to

[47] Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p155.
[48] Derrida, *Spectres*, p31.
[49] Royle, 'What is Deconstruction', p6.
[50] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p11.
[51] Royle, 'What is Deconstruction' p11, quoting Derrida's 'Afterw.rds' (1992).
[52] Ibid., p8, quoting Derrida's 'Living On/ Border Lines' (1979).
[53] Derrida, *Spectres*, ppxviii; xix;
[54] Heidegger, *The Ister*, p29.

rivers and to forms of memory in the 1940s, all of which meditate on temporality – not as a linear condition of history, but as a domain through which notions of source, origins or destiny, which appear to be lost to the present, may yet be intimated as returning, or capable of being returned to, the source of ontological redemption. *Spectres of Marx*, for instance, adopts Heidegger's description of the *Anwesende* which 'lingers in this transitory passage (*Weile*)... *between* what *goes* and what *comes*, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives'.[55] We are witnessing a partial mutation of deconstruction's critical horizon in the direction of Heideggerean ontology.

IV

Why does the uncanny turn spectral, and the spectral 'ontological', and why at this point in 1987-1989, does Derrida return to these Heideggerean formulations of the late-1930s-1940s? Why indeed do these concepts of uncanny temporalities, ghosts and 'hauntology' strike such a chord in the study of culture at this point? There is no secret that *Spectres of Marx* was conceived originally as a submission to a conference in 1993 entitled 'Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective'. In a companion volume, Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg make clear that original context for these discussions was the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which brought with it 'a vague sense of foreboding, a haunted sense' that changes of such magnitude would result in malign and benign transformations in global culture as a whole.[56] It is from this point on that the uncanny is transposed from psychological, aesthetic and philosophical domains to politics, sociology and history. For Royle deconstruction now becomes 'the opening to freedom, responsibility, decision, ethics and politics,'[57] while the uncanny is linked to 'the historical and political experiences of class, race or age' and the experience of imperialism and colonialism.[58] Wolfreys sees the spectre as 'that which haunts politics when… politics is nothing other than the law and the system',[59] while Masschelein emphasises the uncanny's links to alienation as an economic, political and psychological condition.[60]

[55] Derrida, *Spectres*, p25.
[56] Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective*, London, Routledge, 1995, pviii.
[57] Royle, 'What is Deconstruction', p11.
[58] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p23.
[59] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p22.
[60] Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, pp131, 136.

There has been very little attempt to read these overtures for a new uncanny ethics or politics back against the particular transformations of the 1990s in which Marx is exchanged for Heidegger – or indeed to probe the Heideggerean influx into uncanny theory in its own political context of the 1930s-40s. A notable absence in the many returns to *Spectres of Marx* is Derrida's previous *Of Spirit* – a book in which the enigmatic relation to time was already explored and consolidated with his evolving interest in the uncanny and the spectral: 'His step carries him into the night, like a *revenant*'.[61] It is also a book which aimed to exonerate Heidegger's anti-metaphysical turn in the 1940s as a redemptive model for cultural and political theory at the end of the twentieth century.

In what follows I want to explore these links in two ways: one is to make the point that Heidegger's turn to the uncanny is already an older gesture, and a metaphysical one, which repeats motifs within Romantic philosophy; the second is that the anti-conceptualism of the uncanny is itself a transcendant gesture, and, moreover, one which is not ultimately distinct from the language of uncanny origins and the violent eruption of truth – a politics in sublime mode – which marks the messianism of Heidegger's encounter with Nazism, rather than being the prophylaxis against it.

Consider the emergent eschatology in these tropes: the concealed dimension of time as bearer of a displaced and enigmatic promise of redemption. Karl Löwith criticised Heidegger's 'historiological futurism' and its remote and disguised dependence on Christian eschatology.[62] In an interview with Maurizio Ferraris (1996) Derrida himself invoked 'a reaffirmation of the eschatological and messianic as a structured relation to the future';[63] likewise in *Spectres of Marx*, the 'democratic promise' will always keep an 'absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event'[64]. People might concede the figure of the temporal as a neutral one which de facto must accompany uncanny theory's turn to the historical, which forms the basis for a new address to politics. But if justice is temporalised *beyond all living present*, this temporalisation transcends historiography. Instead, a kind of infinite justice – boundless,

[61] Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1989, p91.
[62] Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p85.
[63] Derrida and Ferraris, *Taste for the Secret*, p21.
[64] Derrida, *Spectres*, p65.

'absolutely non-reappropriable'[65] – is conceived in relation to the present as something disjunct from it; it is in effect given a figurative place beyond the present: the infinite outside the finite. This relation is then mythically concretised as a strata of time (the absolutely anterior, the 'to come'). The past and future become the crypt and heaven of abstraction, of infinitude, of 'democracy' in ideal mode, with the uncanny and the spectral as the ghostly messengers linking us to alternative and unthinkable possibilities.

There is a philosophical genealogy for this way of thinking the absolute, the ontology of the boundless in contradistinction to the formal and objectified or conceptualised 'present', as an uncanny rift in time. It is one of the ironies of the many returns to Freud and Hoffmann, in order to elaborate uncanny histories, that none of them follow the lead back to F. W. J. Schelling to its ultimate conclusion. It is Schelling who yields Freud his definition of the term 'uncanny' (for Masschelein it is throughout the 'Freudian uncanny') and it was Schelling and G. H. Schubert's romantic philosophies of nature which Hoffmann had been reading in the months before his work on 'The Sandman'.[66] In 1811, Schelling began work on a new philosophy of time, *The Ages of the World*, whose major innovation is that it attempts to reconfigure the idealist notion of 'the absolute' as a being whose absolute nature is materialised and truncated in time, so that its essence is concealed in the unconscious past which secretly grounds the form of the present. What founds the present is more powerful and boundless than it ('*hauntology*' is 'larger and more powerful than an ontology'),[67] while no freedom will emerge except in a future that radically disturbs the categories of the present ('a future which does not allow itself to be modalized... into the form of the present').[68] Time, for Schelling, thus girdles the present with an eschatological structure in a very similar manner to Heidegger and Derrida's formulations. The latent and ontologically 'missing' force of the absolute was approached by Schelling in the 1810s through metaphors of concealed and unbearable primeval chaos, madness or fire. But in his lectures on mythology of the 1840s (in the context of yet another period of political reaction) Schelling returned to this notion of a repressed ontological ground haunting the present as the 'uncanny': 'what one

[65] Derrida, *Truth of the Secret*, p21.
[66] See Matt ffytche, *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp149-161, 186-188.
[67] Derrida, *Spectres*, p10.
[68] Royle, 'What is Deconstruction', p11.

calls everything that should have stayed secret, hidden, latent, but has come to the fore' – the definition which enters Freud's text in 1919.[69]

Schelling, in the 1810s-1840s already had his ghosts, his uncanny dimensions of the unconscious, the barely intimated and inarticulable, and they are metaphysical through and through – a holding-place for religious and metaphysical concepts of the absolute within a seemingly secular vocabulary of time. Though Royle names Derrida's messianism as a 'messianism without religion', as a 'structure of experience'[70] one could argue that this is still experience structured *as religion would have it*, with invocations of the infinite, and of incalculable forms of justice and community. *Spectres of Marx* is packed with such overtures to the infinite: 'the infinite promise', 'untimeliness of the infinite surprise', 'without this experience of the impossible, one might as well give up on both justice and the event'.[71] Spivak in the companion volume to *Spectres of Marx* describes communism as a 'figuration of the impossible which Derrida's work allows us to call a spectrality'.[72] As Jay pointed out a decade ago, it may not be enough 'to say that hegemonic attempts at closure necessarily call up their spectral others... when those others are themselves no less – and may be more – problematic versions of the same desire for wholeness'.[73]

V

There is a second point here: that this sublime and boundless justice – 'the *excess* of justice with respect to the accounted for'[74] – at the same time threatens to make void the discriminated values and particular injustices of the present, and indeed, to empty such values of their possible social meaning. Derrida alerts us to 'the necessarily inadequate form of whatever has to be measured against this promise – the infinite respect of the singularity *and* infinite alterity of the other'.[75] But such thus threatens to make particular political positions and ethical choices indifferent. What I want to suggest, then, is that this ethics and politics in dialogue with the uncanny which emerges in the 1990s is vitiated by a tendency towards

[69] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie* (1842), *Sämmtliche Werke*, Stuttgart, Cotta, 1856-61, abt. 2, vol. 2, p649
[70] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p292.
[71] Derrida, *Spectres*, pp65, 37.
[72] Magnus and Cullenberg, *Whither Marxism*, p110.
[73] Jay, 'The Uncanny Nineties', p
[74] Derrida and Ferraris, *Taste for the Secr*et, p23.
[75] Derrida, *Spectres*, p65.

abstraction (too idealised a concept of 'justice' and 'democracy'), and that to opt for critical theory in a sublime style – one which seeks to destabilise more contingent knowledge, and invoke the agency of obscurity in history – disables the mechanisms for judging ethical and political alternatives at precisely the point at which (1930-1945; 1989-1991) political hegemonies are undergoing seismic transformations.

The figures of the ghostly and the uncanny tend towards abstraction in a number of ways. Firstly, they characteristically remove themselves from implication in any domain of demarcated objects, relations and identities: the 'to come' is not yet categorized or programmed; the spectral escapes 'positivist or constructivist logic',[76] just as for Heidegger the ultimate and abysmal in man 'can never be discerned through the mere description that establishes data'.[77] This tendency manifests itself on the ground of ethics as an appeal *against* the specific terms of legal or ethical distinctions operative in particular situations. For Royle, 'justice necessarily "exceeds law and calculation"';[78] Derrida's concern for justice is, 'Not for calculable equality, therefore, not for the symmetrising and synchronic accountability or imputability of subjects or objects'[79] (compare Heidegger's critique of 'the they', which 'knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules and public norms... It reckons up infractions of them and tries to balance them off,').[80] Or again, justice 'must carry beyond *present* life, life as *my* life or *our* life. *In general*.'[81]

As a way of demonstrating the effects of such abstraction in the context of the 'political uncanny', I want to turn to Derrida's defence of Heidegger's anti-metaphysical position in *Of Spirit*, which, significantly enough, turns on a description of the *Unheimlich* in the final section of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, written in 1934, a section which ends notoriously enough with references to Niezsche's transvaluation of all values and the suggestion that 'the works that are being peddled about nowadays as the philosophy of National Socialism' have nothing to do with 'the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter between global technology and modern man)'.[82] In this final chapter, Heidegger argues that the violence of the uncanny should be distinguished from common usage in which 'violence

[76] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, px.
[77] Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p149.
[78] Royle, What is Deconstruction, p4.
[79] Derrida, *Spectres*, p22-3.
[80] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p334.
[81] Derrida, *Spectres*, pxx.
[82] Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p199.

is seen from the standpoint of a realm which draws its standards from conventional compromise and mutual aid';[83] he also asserts that the Greeks, 'Pre-eminent in the historical place' are '*without statute and limit, without structure and order*, because they themselves as creators must first create all this'.[84]

The defence revolves around the question of whether *Geist* (which might stand for 'spirit' in the Hegelian, or Christian sense; or mind, or 'spiritedness', or ghost) can be shifted away from its multiple implications in the history of metaphysics, particularly in German idealism. Derrida argues that the difference between *geistig* and *geistlich* (both meaning 'with' or 'of' the spirit) is 'inscribed in contexts with a high political content'; in fact, 'It perhaps decides as to the very meaning of the political as such'.[85] What *Geist* in Heidegger might possibly shift towards (this is what Derrida is trying to ascertain) is a more 'ghostly' address – which figures itself not as governing reason, or as the voice of the metaphysical subject, but simply as temporality, historicality, a listening into the 'to come'. *'L'avenir'*, the 'spectral' and the 'uncanny' are already bonded in this text.

Here is the key passage in which Derrida raises the issue of Nazism, in the context of a critique of 'spirit' and its 'revenance' – that is, in the context of the passage from metaphysics to uncanny theory:

> Because one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism in its genetic form, one cannot be *opposed* to them except by reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectity, even if in its voluntarist form. The constraint of this program remains very strong, it reigns over the majority of discourses which, today and for a long time to come, state their opposition to racism, to totalitarianism, to nazism, to fascism, etc., and do this in the name of spirit, and even of the freedom of (the) spirit, in the name of an axiomatic – for example, that of democracy or 'human rights' – which, directly or not, comes back to this metaphysics of *subjectity*.[86]

[83] Ibid., p150.
[84] Ibid, pp152-3. My italics.
[85] Derrida, *Of Spirit*, p6.
[86] Ibid., pp39-40.

The implications and syntax of this passage are complex – it is not immediately apparent, for instance, what Derrida is saying about the relations between biologism, Nazism and humanism. And this is, already, what makes it in many ways a troubling, or frustrating passage. There seem to be two critiques mapping over each other. The first could be called a critique of the bad '-isms' – biologism, naturalism, racism. Why are these bad? Because they seek to objectify the possibilities of ethico-political life in terms of concrete categories, differentiations and exclusions. In this context they evoke Heidegger's critiques of the 'ontic', as opposed to the ontological; the association also suggests the emerging juridical categories of bio-power, traced two years later in relation to the concentration camp by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. It is here that we might comfortably seek to inscribe Nazism, with its racialist and eugenicist programmes.

However, the object of Derrida's critique is *not* simply Nazism, but something far broader than this: it is both the culture of conceptualisation and objectification, as well as the 'spiritualisation of thinking', *per se*. For Derrida, 'one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism', or oppose them, except by 'reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination' – ie, except by separating out something transcendent, in opposition to these cruder objectifications. But this once again threatens the return of spirit [*Geist*] as a 'unilaterality' or 'metaphysics of subjectity'. That is to say, any discourse aiming to separate itself out from such coercive 'isms', by appealing to more ideal or spiritual categories, inherently reimplicates it in a history of metaphysics (Christian, rationalist, or idealist) and hence in deployments of power and the reimposition of coercive regimes. It is perhaps here, that Nazism is inscribed, too: as a metaphysic of subjectity in voluntarist form, ie., a will to power, a transvaluation of values. And this gives us a new set of alignments: next to 'racism' we now have, not simply biologism and naturalism, but 'totalitarianism… Nazism… fascism'. But here comes the crucial shift: the real object of critique within this passage is not Nazism or fascism but the debased reinscription of spirit, the metaphysics of subjectity, made 'in the name of an axiomatic – for example, that of democracy or "human rights"'.

The more absolutely ethics centres on the final drama of overcoming the language of 'presence', the more differentiated political phenomena (fascism, liberalism, humanism) become elided, or exchangeable. They are all equally vicious from the point of view of an 'infinite' or unbounded justice – a justice that must transcend all social relations and

distinctions. This gesture was reinforced in 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' (originally delivered at a colloquium in 1989) in which Derrida argued that Walter Benjamin would have judged 'any juridical trial of Nazism' as vain, likewise 'any judgmental apparatus, any historiography still homogenous with the space in which Nazism developed up to and including the final solution'.[87] But this homogeneity appears also to implicate: 'any interpretation drawing on philosophical, moral, sociological, psychological or psychoanalytical concepts, and especially juridical concepts',[88] that is to say, from almost any possible critical position within the humanities, juridical and social sciences apart from the 'uncanny'.

And yet it is not hard to see how the ghostly alternative – the very terms of the uncanny temporalities (*Zukunft* or *avenir*) which gesture beyond the metaphysics of presence – can themselves, as already noted, be easily re-implicated, both in their own metaphysical tradition (going back through Heidegger to Schelling, and beyond this to the negative theology of Boehme, Tauler and Eckhart, where its Christian roots are clearly evident), but also in the appeal to Nazism. When, in his 1942 in lectures on Hölderlin's '*Der Ister*' Heidegger opposes the uncanny to an ontology based on quantification, he makes it clear that this problem concerns the historic encounter between Germany, Bolshevism and Americanism, an encounter in which 'ahistoricality and historicality are decisively at issue'.[89] Historicality, here, is taken to mean the sublime and German ontology of destiny; as opposed to the impoverished language of Being in Russia and America, bound up with equivalence (democracy, communism) and instrumentalisation.

Derrida, in *Spectres*, makes very lengthy reference to Heidegger's exploration of time as dis-jointure (*Unfug* or *adikia*), aligning his own notion of ethical justice with this concept of 'dis-jointed or dis-adjusted time without which there would be neither history, nor event, nor promise of justice',[90] and 'on the basis of which we are trying here to *think the ghost*'.[91] This dis-adjustment (in which is already inscribed the logic of anti-conceptualism which will guide uncanny theory in the 1990s and 2000s) is removed from its violent contextual implication in

[87] Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p60.
[88] Ibid., p60.
[89] Heidegger, *The Ister*, p70.
[90] Derrida, *Spectres*, p170.
[91] Ibid, p25.

Heidegger's texts of the 30s and early 40s, but still invoked as a '*Violence* of the law before the law and before meaning, violence that interrupts time, disarticulates it, displaces it out of its natural lodging: "out of joint"'.[92] The displacement from 'natural lodging' recalls the German term *Unheimlich*, just as 'out of joint' purposefully evokes the ghost in *Hamlet*, Derrida's figurative doorway onto spectral and uncanny ethics and temporalities at the opening of *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida constantly affirms Heidegger's insistence on thinking '*Dikē* on this side of, before, or at a distance from the juridical-moral determinations of justice'.[93] He adds: 'What if disadjustment were on the contrary the condition of justice?'[94]

Derrida is making reference to Heidegger's essay on Anaximander from 1946 (the postwar year) and the point was perhaps that, rueing his engagement with fascism in the early 1930s, Heidegger's turn to the uncanny opened the path for a thinking beyond political immediacy, and beyond the objectifications of political will per se. Perhaps something akin to this transition, from political identification to historical and philosophical mourning (in which Heidegger and Benjamin are made to hold hands), was now proffered for those who felt the certainties of Marxism and communism implode at the end of the 1980s. And yet exactly the same constellation of terms *Unheimlich*, *dikē* and *Unfug* [dis-jointure] already appears at the heart of the *Introduction to Metaphysics* of 1935, where it is invoked violently, and as a condition for a higher ontology and a more radical assertion of historical community.[95] In the even more overtly fascistic *Rectoral Address* of 1933, Heidegger again disdains the 'arsenal of useful knowledge and values', and 'objectivity', in order to invoke the power to overwhelm and disturb the conditions of existence, so that the Volk may embark 'on the way to its future history'.[96]

My point here is not to establish some *ad hominem* link between the uncanny and fascism. Rather, what I think the foregoing brings out is that tropes which foreground the anti-conceptual, the non-objectifiable, and the uncanny, do not by virtue of this transcend either metaphysics or violent and coercive political implication. Derrida's 'infinite justice', it will be remembered, was both a name for the Islamic God and a codeword for the bombardment of Afghanistan. What is required, surely, is vigilance over the use of terms in particular

[92] Ibid, p31.
[93] Ibid, p23.
[94] Ibid, p19.
[95] See, Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp160-163.
[96] Martin Heidegger, 'The Self-Assertion of the German University', in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy*: *A Critical Reader*, Cambridge, MA, and London, MIT Press, 1993, pp33-36.

concrete, historical and ethical situations, rather than the attempt to transcend that violence through the invocation of a counter-trope, Masschelein's 'unconcept', in which all logics are equated (Benjamin = Heidegger; Marx = Freud; Nazism = liberalism).

VI

I've followed a very particular argument here, which is that what radicalised the uncanny in the 1990s was its merging with the 'spectral' and the implication of both in a new counter-ontology, or counter-historiography, which was taken up in cultural and sociological work. It is this aspect which underlies the differentiation of uncanny theory from psychoanalysis (which, whether post-Freudian, Kleinian or Lacanian, has its own ways of theorising the psychical investments in social and historical relationships, more likely to turn on concepts of fantasy and projection). Equally, the historical and ontological turn, and the emphasis on the sublime, differentiates the uncanny from earlier deconstruction. The investigation then focused on the ethical and political mobilisation of the uncanny within Derrida's engagement with Heidegger. Here the generalised, redemptive and disturbing condition of the uncanny finds itself disturbingly reflected and inverted in examples of political catastrophe which it is powerless to judge, oppose, or name, because its ethos and its message is the refusal of objectification. This is not the only narrative one could extract from the uncanny in contemporary theory (though both Royle and Wolfreys emphasise the significance of Derrida and the associations with temporality, history and ethics). However, I could have approached this investigation from a very different angle and would still have come up against the issue of abstraction and the collapse of differentiation. To illustrate this, I want to draw a brief parallel with an alternative depiction of the uncanny via a concentration on *affect*, which is not so emphasised in Derrida's work, but is in Royle's.

Royle's *The Uncanny* is self-consciously diverse in its approach, and its sense of irony and heterogeneity, as well as its humour, to a certain extent make it more of a playful and sceptical work than Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, and more resistant to the ethical messianism of that text (though this remains one of Royle's many points of reference). One near constant implication of Royle's book, however, is that the uncanny emerges as an experience, sensation or intuition. It 'involves *feelings* of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of

who one is', or 'a *feeling* of uncanniness may come from curious coincidences';[97] it can be a '*flickering sense* (but not conviction) of something supernatural', or of 'homeliness uprooted'.[98] It can be '*felt* in response to witnessing epileptic or similar fits' or 'in response to dolls and other lifelike or mechanical objects';[99] or 'involve a *feeling* of something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy', or an experience of déjà vu.[100] Such feelings come above all 'in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness'.[101] Suddenly, 'one's *sense* of oneself' may seem strangely questionable.[102]

The concentration on affect and sensibility here (on materialisation within the experience of a person, rather than diffusion in the fabric of historicity) is markedly different from the approach of Derrida, but we are once again being pushed towards this strange realm of indifference and abstraction. And this seems a preposterous conclusion. How could the uncanny – which here stands for something entirely disturbing, and deeply affecting – be in any way abstract or indifferent? What I would suggest is that the emphasis on feeling and experiencing the uncanny in Royle reflects a desire to represent immediacy in experience – the uncanny is a disturbance apprehended via the affects of a subject that has not yet elicited the terms of what disturbs it. But this is more than a question of perceptual delay. The subject or individual will never arrive at such terms, for this would be to dissipate the uncanny. In his own essay on the uncanny, Freud recounts the incident in which, while alone in a sleeping compartment on a train, a sudden jolt made the door of the wash cabinet swing open giving rise to the appearance of an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown coming in. 'Jumping up with the intention of putting him right', Freud is dismayed to find that the intruder 'was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass'.[103] This incident is included by Freud as a stage in 'reality-testing'. It is a moment of uncertainty, quickly resolved, though it may leave a lingering effect. By contrast, in Royle's text, the subject of the uncanny will not move towards a reconstruction of the causes or conditions of the disturbance. The focus remains with the uncanny intuition itself, which is valorised precisely for its ability to ward off the impulse towards identification and categorization. We are geared once more for the opening

[97] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p1 (italicizations in this and the following quotes are my own).
[98] Ibid., p1.
[99] Ibid., pp1-2.
[100] Ibid., p2.
[101] Ibid., p2.
[102] Ibid., p1.
[103] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', *SE*, vol 17, p248.

of a future 'which does not allow itself to be modalized or modified into the form of the present'.[104]

Royle's uncanny immediacy is implicitly encountered from the point of view, not of a subject which is erased, but a lonely inner vantage point besieged by various kinds of foreignness and unfamiliarity, and which encounters all otherness *as* disturbance. It is worth pausing here, to consider the way in which these formulations grope towards, but are unable to 'present', an idea of mediation – in the following sense: 'In order to know an object thoroughly, it is essential to discover and comprehend all of its aspects, its relationships and its "mediations". We shall never achieve this fully, but insistence on all-round knowledge will protect us from errors and inflexibility'.[105] In effect, the uncanny has become a word for everything that used to be thought under terms such as 'mediation', 'intersubjectivity', 'relationship' – its meaning 'may have to do most of all with what is not oneself, with others, with the world "itself".[106] Any aspect of experience which involves wider relationships – sociological, linguistic, psychological, political – is at some point reassigned by Royle to the uncanny. They are now all primarily interesting for the way in which they are disturbing or inexplicable for the subject. All historical relations, all connections between people (technological or discursive) are in this sense ghostly. The uncanny appears to be the historical ghost of the *thought* of connection. Implicit in Royle's account are the terms of a 'problematisation' of the self in relation to others and otherness. But because all the terms and links in this equation are now simply 'uncanny', the dilemma is resolved by elision. The uncanny absorbs all differences and makes them unthinkable, and at the same time, diffuse and interchangeable: they are *all* uncanny.

There is a banal point here, which is that, through its own increasingly familiar presence in theory, the uncanny has lost its *Verfremdungs* effect (Brecht's *Verfremdungs* effect is itself cited by Royle and Masschelein as another example of the uncanny).[107] The piling on of horror effects might then reflect an anxious attempt to regain and resusbstantiate the experience of disturbance, which has lost its points of reference and become vague and

[104] Royle, 'What is Deconstruction', p11.
[105] V. I. Lenin cited by Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in Ronald Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, London and New York, Verso, 1980, p33. I have purposefully chosen this characterisation of mediation, which allows for incompleteness, mobility and difference in perspective, from two authors usually associated with 'totalization'.
[106] Royle, *The Uncanny*, p2.
[107] Ibid., p5.

ubiquitous. There is a less banal point which is that by remaking all other theories in its own image – 'everything in Marx… that has to do with notions of alienation, revolution and repetition, comes down to a thinking of the uncanny';[108] 'The death drive is eerily uncanny, uncannily eerie'[109] – forms of critical thought which originally gave more complex (including ambivalent and ironic) accounts of subjective and sociological tensions in modernity, and more complex accounts of the production of sociological differences, have been subsumed under vaguer definitions of malaise, estrangement, bewilderment, loss and anticipation. What does it mean to carry forward from Marxism the tenor of unreality and disturbance, rather than the critique of capitalist economy, the division of classes and the alienation of labour? What does it mean to carry forward from psychoanalysis into cultural theory a feeling of unreality and strangeness, rather than the analysis of subjectivity and of the subjective and social function of fantasy?

To return to the situation of the early 1990s, one can see how the turn to the uncanny reached its apotheosis during a crisis in political and cultural theory, and that there was in the very turn to tropes of phantoms and spectres an invocation of a period of political mourning and remembrance, a melancholic introversion. However, there were serious dangers in the prolongation of this shift in critical idiom into something more than a temporary response. One danger was that, by merging aspects of deconstruction (its scepticism towards objectification) with something closer to a Heideggerean counter-ontology of history, the loss arising from a certain kind of political uncertainty (the collapse of communism, the apotheosis of an as yet unanalysed but increasingly triumphant neoliberalism) was too easily converted into a form of critical affirmation: the affirmation of the uncanny, in which the terms of political and sociological objectification might be refused and exchanged for a vaguer, and more sublime, historicality. Ubiquitous unease and confusion of boundaries becomes the site from which something altogether different and incalculable might emerge. Hence the general call to consolidate this abandonment of received political and social identities via the uncanny: 'The uncanny is… a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one's own so-called "own" name, but also the proper names of others, of places, institutions and events.'[110] The 'disturbance'

[108] Ibid., p4.
[109] Ibid., p88.
[110] Ibid., p1.

consolidated and reified as the ‘uncanny’ was then forced to carry the burden of what, previously, might have occasioned a political, psychoanalytic or post-colonial critique.

There was also the danger that the Manichean severance of one set of tropes – the uncanny, the spectral, the dis-junct, the enigmatic – from the logic of names and laws associated with social or cultural objectification, would be conceived too naively or reductively. To one theoretical language is ascribed all coercion (presence is entirely alienating), to the other release, infinitude or a positive analytical complexity. But this is a very naive manner in which to re-imagine the ethical-political work of identification in criticism. As if the ethics of criticism could be materialised in a particular language or topos (the beyond, the to-come, the uncanny), like the Kleinian ‘good breast’, rather than in a difficult, forever imperfect, set of socio-political encounters and socio-political differentiations.

Above all, in lieu of cultural analysis and critique, the uncanny has been sustained by a certain suggestiveness – the suggestion of other theories (Freud, Marx, Brecht, and so on); the suggestion of radicalism (as disturbance); the suggestion of psychological and sociological complexity; the suggestion of political and historical redemption (the unforeseeable, the nearly discovered) – at the same time as sociological details and critical paradigms have been leached away in favour of the elucidation of the uncanny itself. Does not the uncanny end up having more in common with the neoliberal culture it set out to resist, accommodated to passivity, to half-elucidation, to bewilderment, and to the possible, just where greater vigilance was needed? In uncanny criticism, community and radicalism take on a phantom existence – ubiquitously surmised; nowhere effectively materialised. Perhaps in a context of dwindling resources and marching instrumentalization within academia, uncanny theory may yet become re-radicalised – might stake out a ground and a purpose, rather than await the emergence of history from the night of the unexpected.