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FREUD AND JENTSCH READ HOFFMANN'S UNCANNY AUTOMATA

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kamelia Spassova
Sofia University

Abstract. The following paper examines the elaboration of the concept of uncanny between literature and psychoanalysis. In shaping the concept, both Ernst Jentsch in "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906) and Sigmund Freud in "The Uncanny" (1919) carefully read Hoffmann's fantastic stories of automata. While Freud develops his theory of the uncanny (concerning the automatism of unconscious repetition) by reading "The Sandman", Jentsch dwells on "Automata" in his approach on intellectual uncertainty. In this paper I also discuss anthropomorphic machines and the idea of uncanny valley in robotics, concluding that the notion of uncanny always involves negative anagnorisis, or misrecognition between inside/outside; human/automaton; animate/inanimate.

Keywords: uncanny; automaton; Doppelgänger; negative anagnorisis; Jentsch; Freud; E.T.A. Hoffmann

1. Hoffmann's Automaton Reads the Unconsciousness

> "All figures of this sort", said Lewis, "which can scarcely be said to counterfeit humanity so much as to travesty it-mere images of living death or inanimate life-are most distasteful to me. When I was a little boy, I ran away crying from a waxwork exhibition I was taken to, and even to this day I never can enter a place of the sort without a horrible, eerie, shuddery feeling [**ohne von einem unheimlichen** grauenhaften Gefühl ergriffen zu werden]. […] The fact of any human being's doing anything in association with those lifeless figures which counterfeit the appearance and movements of humanity has always, to me, something fearful, unnatural, I may say terrible, about it [etwas Drückendes, **Unheimliches**, ja Entsetzliches].
>
> (Hoffmann 1967, 81, 95; Hoffmann 2013)

The preceding reflections on the uncanny are delivered by Ludwig the musician, a character in E. T. A. Hoffmann's short fantastic story *The Automata*. The story was first published in 1814 (in the literary magazine *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*) and again five years later as part of his collection of novellas and fairy-tales, *The Serapion Brethren*[1)].

The thoughts were prompted by the machine music created by professor X's anthropomorphic automata. One of these robots is the enigmatic Talking Turk who "reads" people's unconscious and foretells their destiny.

Unlike Wolfgang von Kempelen's historical machine, constructed in 1769, which got burned in a fire in 1854, and which mercilessly defeated all of its opponents on the chess board, Hoffmann's automaton, the Turk, is not a chess player but a fortune teller. His character makes the problem of free will central to most of Hoffmann's novellas. This constitutes the old question of whether fate can be intentionally and freely determined or if it is under the control of automatic, uncontrolled forces. Hoffmann marks a key change in the image of the fortune teller – from the realm of the religious and the mystical to the realm of the logical and the mechanical. The enigmatic connection between the *living* and the *automatic*, as well as the *imitation game* between the two appear in the works of both Kempelen and Hoffmann. This riddle is a generally shared contextual mystery in the transitional period between the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The non-human figures — wax sculptures, dolls, puppets, anthropomorphic automata, and all types of mimetic machines in general – can trigger a feeling of inexplicable horror in us, they can cause us to experience the uncanny effect and can evoke a feeling of trouble and anxiousness in any human creature, for there is something about their resemblance to humans that *just isn't right*. The automatism of a box's secret compartment that pops-up is central for the uncanny effect which corresponds to Freud's idea of *unheimlich* . Be it the dwarf hidden inside the machine (as is the case for Kempelen's Turk) or the very opposite – the machine hidden inside the human (the automatism of the unconscious repetition), there is something that is valid for both – the algorithm of something hidden that suddenly emerges and disturbs us with its untimely appearance.

Similarly to the utterances of ancient oracles, while answering the questions that are directed to him, Hoffmann's automaton the Turk exposes all secret incentives and hidden desires and, ultimately, a fatalistic predestination. He reveals the fate of the questioner and lays it out on the chess board. The Turk's head is a perfect reproduction of a human one. He rolls his eyes, turns his head, stamps his feet, and out of his mouth comes a stream of air, the product of an acoustic illusion. But the characters in the story suspect that a human being with supernatural powers is hidden inside of him that can "read" the questioner's unconscious.

The short story *The Automata*, together with the set of problems that surround the topic of a subject that is divided in two, and the peculiar connection between the living and the mechanical, the contingent and the fateful, the visible form and the hidden grounds, between free will and instrumentality, between the figure of the inventor and his creation.

2. Uncanny Valley: Robotics Scientists Should Read More Hoffman

Bukimi no Tani (不気味の谷現象*; uncanny valley*) is an idea introduced by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori in the year of 1970[2]. Mori's hypothesis can be reduced to the proposition that anthropomorphic machines trigger an uncanny effect with their imperfect resemblance to humans. Humanoids look almost the same as people but this distance of *almost like* provoked heated debates. Two trends then arose in the field of cybernetics, animation, architecture, and video games that discuss the effects of the uncanny valley. One of them, anthropomorphic trend defended by Hiroshi Ishiguro, tries to overcome the *uncanny valley* by creating a machine that perfectly imitates humans. The other one, to which Mori's hypothesis belongs, takes the path of consciously constructing non-anthropomorphic machines – their appearance, structure, form, and the proportion of their elements must be different than those of humans. The attempt to walk through the *uncanny valley* should outline the wagers of the anthropomorphic (*human-like*) and non-anthropomorphic (*unhuman-like*) trends, led by the problem of the machines' appearance.

The example which Mori used to mark the entering in the uncanny valley is the prosthetic hand. Just like Ludwig, the protagonist in Hoffmann's *The Automata*, Mori admits that he never liked looking at wax figures because they looked creepy to him (Kageki 2012). The prosthetic hand has had the same disturbing effect on him as the creepy feeling intensifies if the hand starts to move, as is the case with myoelectric prosthetics. A key factor in the artificial hand's indistinguishability from a real human hand is that it is designed to be covered with skin instead of bolts and metal cylinders. Therefore, Masahiro Mori's hypothesis suggests that in the increase of *similarity* between human and machine, a certain point comes where telling the two apart becomes difficult and it is that the very moment that triggers the negative (*unheimlich*) effect of uncanniness, repulsion, terror, and anxiety. The factors for increasing the uncanny feeling are movement and imitating the human.

With his works in the field of robotics, Mori is well placed within the European line of interpretation of the *unheimlich* phenomenon: from Hoffmann's romanticist short stories, to Jean Paul and Mary Shelley, and through the establishment of the notion of *unheimlich* in Sigmund Freud and Ernst Jentsch's works as a category on the edge of aesthetics and psychoanalysis, to the numerous lines of interpretation in post-Structuralist theory about the automatism of the return of the repressed and about the intersection between *repetition* and *negation*. This comes to show that, without the need of additional speculation about whether Masahiro Mori took inspiration from Freud, or whether he specifically read and was familiar with Jentsch's article (most probably not), that there are clearly too many parallels and coincidences present between the phenomena of *unheimlich* in Jentsch and Freud's works and *bukimi no tani* in Mori's to be ignored. Furthermore, it was precisely in the 1970s when Freud's essay was rediscovered by the French theoretical scene and heated conceptual debates sparked around it[3].

The dynamics of the German word pair *heimlich/unheimlich* make it suitable for the translation of the Japanese antonyms *shinwateki/bukimi*. *Bukimi* is the Japanese translation of the title of Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919), where he makes a broad linguistic remark about the ambivalence of the adjective *unheimlich*. The translation of *unheimlich* as *bukimi* in Japan appeared even before an European publication of Mori's hypothesis about the uncanny valley. The connection between those two traditions, the robotics tradition of 不気味の谷現象 and *das Unheimliche* tradition, is due to the sagacity of the translator.

The polish curator, Jasia Reichardt, who takes great interest in cybernetics' significance in art, played a key role in the synchronization between the European and Japanese traditions. The term *uncanny valley* emerged shortly after Mori brought it into the Japanese context and it was done so by virtue of Reichardt's 1978 translation. This is when it was established that *the uncanny valley* and Freud's and Jentsch's heritage in the European scene connect at the point of intersection between aesthetics, psychoanalysis, technology, and science. This connection uncovered new paths of development for theoretical and aesthetic imagination.

Besides curating such an emblematic exhibition, Jasia Reichardt also wrote the book: *Robots: Facts, Fiction, and Prediction.* One of the chapters in her book addresses Mori's valley. Its title is *Human reactions to imitation humans, or Masahiro Mori's Uncanny Valley* (Reichardt 1978). Here, Jasia Reichardt lays out Mori's hypothesis of the valley and introduces the translation *uncanny valley*. Without explicitly referring to Jentsch and Freud, this connection is already a working one, since the established English translation of Freud's notable essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919) is precisely *The Uncanny* (1925).

Mori's *bukimi no tani* can only benefit from the recognition of the heritage of the European humanities, from references to the observations made by Freud and Jentsch, to the authors who comment on them throughout the 20th century. The extremities of experiencing a sense of empathy and its rapid disruption caused by the increasing affinity between man and machine synchronize well with the paradoxes of *the uncanny.* The affinitive, comfortable, and homelike suddenly become unfamiliar. Our hidden fears pop-up right in front of us, embodied in flesh and blood, our hidden fears. There, on the very edge, where it's difficult to tell apart the living from the non-living, the organic from the mechanical, and the human from the non-human.

The whole story around the problem of M. Mori's uncanny valley can only confirm how important it is the visions such as that of Hoffmann to be read and remembered. To some extent, science simply carries out what has already been "invented" by literature, but there is a need for someone to remember, translate, and point out these links. These relations need not be "liaisons dangereuses" as long as the possibility for a joint conversation is found.

3. Freud Reads Jentsch: Olympia or the Turk is the most Uncanny Automaton

The whole debate about *unheimlich* started from one of Jentsch's articles from 1906, while Freud and Otto Rank later revise, critique, develop and adapt the concept. Jentsch's theory is directly linked to the term of the automata, and the unheimlich effect is, according to his perception, a result of *intellectual uncertainty*, of not being able to tell if the thing in front of you is living or non-living, organic or mechanical, a human or an automaton.

> In storytelling, one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader **in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character.** This is done in such a way that the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of his attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect, as we said, would hereby be quickly dissipated. In his works of fantasy, E. T. A. Hoffmann has repeatedly made use of this psychological artifice with success. (Jentsch 1997, 13, bold is mine)

This is the very excerpt from Jentsch that Freud cites in his essay *Das Unheimliche*, as he goes on to claim that he's solving his colleague's mystery – this observation refers to, most of all, Hoffmann's *The Sandman*. Freud shares his disagreement with Jentsch's general thesis about intellectual uncertainty caused by moving automatons. What he especially takes interest in is the *example* of Hoffmann and his wax figures, dolls and automata. Freud uses the example of Hoffmann to explain the *unheimlich* phenomenon but attaches it to quite a different theory (Freud 1919, 297 – 324).

The story of *The Sandman* illustrates the point of the gaze, the fear of going blind, the castration complex, the Oedipus complex, the redoubled father figure, and, generally, the Doppelgänger figure – all of which constitute central elements of Freud's method. Hoffmann's fairy-tale will later become a crucial example in the Austrian psychoanalyst's work on clarifying the operating mechanism of *unheimlich*: to negate and repeat at the same time. The *unheimlich* effect represses the familiar, domestic and affinitive that returns as unfamiliar and strange. Thus an intimate core swoops into the gaze from the outside, as a foreign body (later Lacan will term it *extimité* in order to emphases the coincidence of inside and outside)[4].

Freud cites this excerpt from Jentsch's article and criticizes his theses in order to present his own. However, Jentsch's article also includes the following segment that Freud left out in his citation (every citation is inevitably a cropping since it always reduces and decontextualizes):

> This peculiar effect makes its appearance even more clearly when imitations of the human form not only reach one's perception, but when on top of everything they appear to be united with certain bodily or mental functions. This is where the impression easily produced by the automatic figures belongs that is so awkward for

> many people. Once again, those cases must here be discounted in which the objects are very small or very familiar in the course of daily usage. A doll which closes and opens its eyes by itself, or a small automatic toy, will cause no notable sensation of this kind, while on the other hand, for example, the life-size machines that perform complicated tasks, blow trumpets, dance and so forth, very easily give one a feeling of unease. The finer the mechanism and the truer to nature the formal reproduction [naturgetreuer die gestaltliche Nachbildung wird], the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance (Jentsch 1997, 12).

If we go back to the excerpt from Hoffmann's *The Automata* in the beginning of this article, it becomes perfectly clear that, through his observations, Jentsch retells Ludwig's thoughts on the difference between the nice little doll and the anthropomorphic automata that evoke incomprehensible horror. Of course, *The Sandman*'s Olympia is an automaton as well, she is a pianist, which makes the reference clear, or, to be more exact, makes clear the contamination that Freud makes. The Austrian psychoanalyst doesn't just merge the automata from both *The Sandman* and *The Automata,* but he also shifts the focus in his interpretation from the automaton Olympia[5)] to the character of the Sandman[6)].

However, Jentsch does not mention *The Sandman* anywhere in his article. If one was to make a careful reading it could easily be noticed that he implicitly refers to Hoffmann's *The Automata*. Freud, on the other hand, believes that *The Sandman* is Hoffmann's major work, and it is namely through this example that he subverts Jentsch. Freud shifts the focus from the intellectual uncertainty caused by the automaton Olympia towards the repetition, duplication, and negation, and, above all, towards the return of the repressed and the castration complex. In his version, Hoffmann's story offers a series of Doppelgängers: *Olympia-and-Nathaniel*, *Coppelius-and-Coppola*, and *the father-and-Spallanzani*. This is how Freud develops his own theory. On a similar note, what Jentsch actually cites from Hoffmann (*The Automata*) and why Freud assumes that that the citation is from another story (*The Sandman*) – sheds light on the mechanism for constructing literary figures through exemplification, or, how the discourses of humanities fall under the spell and charm of certain literary examples. Together, Hoffmann's *The Sandman* and Freud's theory of *unheimlich* form a common enigmatic knot, they explain each other: Freud's theory evokes precisely *The Sandman*'s example and vice versa. Regardless of whether Freud's theory gets criticized (negated) or confirmed (repeated) over and over again, the ones who comment on it use this exact story in their arguments. This is because, ever since Freud, in the debates about what *unheimlich* is, it is no longer possible for one to not also look into *The Sandman* through the glass of new interpretations[7)].

The fascination with Freud and *The Sandman* in the 20th century leaves Jentsch's article in the background. Jentsch suggests in his hypothesis that the *unheimlich* effect has to do with two factors: 1. a zone of indistinguishability between the living

and the non-living, between what is human and automatic, and 2. the animalization, setting in motion, or animation of the automata. These two factors are central in Mori's graph of the uncanny valley – the first one represents the mimetic operator (the x-axis), and the second represents the variation that occurs when motion ensues (the y-axis).

Crucial for both Jentsch and Mori is the point of the lack of recognition – not being able to tell if something is living or lifeless; if it's imitation or not; if it's an illusion or not. The uncanny effect blurs the lines between self and non-self, and with such an erasure of the negation, the line itself becomes ambivalent, and well-established oppositions such as *in/out*, *organic/mechanical*, *human/unhuman* can potentially abruptly change their places.

The uncanny category indicates a division of the subject. This division can be historically analyzed, as Mladen Dolar outstandingly does in the context of the Enlightenment, and its dark side, Romanticism, in order to develop the thesis that "there is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity" (Dolar 1991, 7). He demonstrates a genealogy of the modern subject through the figure of the Doppelgänger and the aesthetic category of *unheimlich*. This is a category of the gap and division, the subject can be viewed as always divided and unidentical to itself (I = I +/- a).[8)] And if the death drive is a repetition compulsion towards the very same thing, then *unheimlich* is the effect of the incapacity to be repeated without a slight divergence. A repetition where the limitations of (self)identification are always undermined. What is crucial for creating a link between *repetition* and *negation* in the context of *unheimlich* is the point of unrecognizability. That is, not being able to tell on which side of the line the thing before you is standing — in or out, subject or object, human or unhuman. This point of the lack of recognition can be defined through Aristotle as *negative anagnorisis* or as a transition from knowing to unknowing[9)].

The Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis consistently deals with trying to distinguish between the tragic, the comical, and the uncanny through the operators of negation (Hegel), the figure of the Doppelgänger (Freud), and the notion of extimacy (Lacan). The recognition (*anagnorisis*), as Alenka Zupančič skilfully demonstrates, works either through the axis of the tragic as the logic of the sacrificial and the exceptional, or, through the axis of the comical as perpetual minimal difference between two similarities through a montage of them[10)]. Therefore, this hypothesis suggests that the indistinguishability between the two axes, between the tragic and the comical logic, opens a gap which causes the *uncanny* effect.

When illustrating the difference between the comical and the uncanny, Alenka Zupančič likes to give the example of the actor who played a dead body on stage and as he was pretending to be dead during the play, he sneezed. To the audience and the actors sneezing was comical, but for the characters that are part of a theatrical illusion, it would have been *unheimlich*: the dead character suddenly moves

(Zupančič 2007, 49). It is funny for a corpse to sneeze only if we know that there is an illusion – he is not really a dead body but a living actor. The logic of the comedy always requires the metaposition of an audience that knows more than the characters. In order to laugh, one should be able to observe from aside or from above, separated from the action, whereas the logic of *unheimlich* is based upon the shift from knowing to unknowing, in which case the metainstance of a distance view is not present. It comes with the interiorized gaze and the uneasy self-reflexive work: is this alive, is this me; is my Doppelgänger organic or mechanical? If *unheimlich* is a point in time, then it is the point of unrecognizability; if *unheimlich* is a special topos, it is uncanny valley where the very notion of a separating line becomes ambivalent: the thing outside of the unexpected turns out to be the thing inside.

In summary, the negative anagnorisis, or the mistaken recognition is always part of the uncanny logic. Freud, with a detective's eye, wants to solve the enigma of Jentsch's text, but he also gets the effect of the negative anagnorisis and confuses the automaton: it is not Olympia but the talking Turk who will tell our fate in the transhuman future.

NOTES

1. The story *Automata* was translated into Bulgarian in the late 1980s, as a result of the demands of the ideology of socialist realism. Svetla Cherpokova explores the reception of Hoffmann in Bulgaria. She distinguishes two periods: the 1940s – 1960s, as a time of ignoring his work, from the period of the 1970s and 1980s, when some acceptance of his work took place under the pretext that his fiction had a realist orientation (Cherpokova 2011, 286 – 300).
2. The article was published in 1970 in Japanese magazine *Energy* and for a long time doesn't draw a lot of attention (Mori 1970, 33 – 35). Its latest English translation that stimulated current discussions around the concept, came out in 2012, as this time, the translation was authorized by Mori himself (Masahiro 2012, 98 – 100).
3. See more about the debates on uncanny in 1970s in: (Masschelein 2011).
4. More about Freud's *unheimlich* and Lacan's *extimité in* (Kalinova 2018).
5. It is interesting that Julia Mark – Hoffmann's young love in Bamberg – can be recognized not in the romanticist character of Olympia, but in the in the enlightened Clara (even in her name we can hear German Aufklärung), she does not want to be an automaton, even if this automaton would play music beautifully.
6. About Freud's shift of focus towards *The Sandman's* Olympia, as well as about the limits of his thesis between the offspring of the eyes and the offspring of the genitalia, see: (Kofman 1991; Nikolchina 1995).
7. For the link between *The Sandman* and Freud with regards to the mystical anxiety from a family crypt and a buried enigma, see: (Rand and Torok 1994)

On the subject of the aesthetic category of uncanny and its role in literature in the prism of the notions of setting, framework and point of view, as well as the ideas of mastery, control, and uncertainty, see: (Tenev and Stoyanov 2016).

8. The problem of the divided subject with regards to the Doppelgänger theory in literature (from German Romanticism to Postmodernism) and philosophy (from Kant and Fichte to Blanchot and Derrida), is further developed in: (Vardoulakis 2010).
9. Together with Maria Kalinova we develop the idea of negative anagnorisis as the impossibility to recognize the familiar, see: (Spassova and Kalinova 2016, 67 – 82).
10. About the distinction between the logic of the tragic and the logic of the comical, see: (Zupančič 2003, 61 – 80).

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✉ **Dr. Kamelia Spassova, Assoc. Prof.**
Author ID (SCOPUS): 57211476615
Researcher ID (Web of Science): G-4150-2019
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-7920-7228
Faculty of Slavic Studies
Sofia University
15, Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd.
Sofia, Bulgaria
E-mail: ksspassova@uni-sofia.bg