

Miszellen | Freud's Uncanny and the Proscenium Stage. Thoughts on the Ego in Theater

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Remark to the title¹

One of the first documentary movies, *A Train Arrives at La Ciotat Train Station* by the Lumière brothers from the year 1895, is well known for its famous urban legend: the rumor is that, while the movie was being shown at one of its first screenings, the audience ran away, fearing that a real train would appear and destroy the café where the screening was taking place. Whether or not this story is true, I believe that the fact that it exists makes it worthy of further consideration. Either the audience must have been used to the fact that the train on screen was not a real one but a picture in motion, or they did not know anything about it and ran away. Interesting within this context is that the urban legend deals with viewing habits. But before focusing on viewing habits within this context, let us first take a look at Sigmund Freud's study *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, also known as *The Wolf Man*, where a similar visual apparatus appears in relation to a dream.²

¹ The first time I became aware of Freud's concept of the uncanny was during Gerald Sigmund's seminar at the Ruhrtriennale Student Campus in 2014. We watched the mentioned piece by Romeo Castellucci together and discussed it afterwards. I decided to focus more on the theory of the uncanny and to connect it to the proscenium stage and the topic of the conference, the "Theater of the A-Human". Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations used in this text have been translated by the author. The quotations are from the sources originally used that were published in German.

² Freud, Sigmund: *Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose*, in: S.F.: *Studienausgabe. Vol: 8: Zwei Kinderneurosen*. Ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich/Angela Richards/James Strachey. Frankfurt am Main 1972, pp. 149-166.

In a footnote, Freud describes the content of a patient's dream that led to his discovery of the primal scene.³ In the following, I will illustrate some key terms from his description. A scene is established in the dream about the wolves outside the window: The window in the dream serves as a proscenium arch framing the content of the dream, bringing together past and present.⁴ The wolves are sitting on a big walnut tree. In Freud's opinion, a tall tree is a symbol of observation, of voyeurism. I quote Freud: "A person sitting on a tree can see everything that is going on below him and cannot himself be seen."⁵ What interests me about these key words is that a description of a proscenium stage can be found in Freud's explanation, perhaps even more than one.

My hypothesis is that a spectator's situation within the apparatus of the proscenium stage can be compared with the situation of a person sitting in a cinema. Both viewers are seated in the dark, looking at a pictorial illusion in front of them, accepting their own reality. Or, as Christian Metz describes the viewing situation in his text *Film and Dream*, "[...] it is the impression of reality itself, and therefore the possibility of a certain affective satisfaction by the way of the diegesis [...]"⁶ In the same paragraph he continues and writes in relation to the perception of reality:

[...] the tendency to perceive as true and external the events and the heroes of the fiction rather than the images and sounds belonging purely to the screening process (which is, nonetheless, the only real agency): a tendency in short, to perceive as real the represented and not the representor (the technological medium of the representation), to pass over the latter without seeing it for what it is, to press on blindly.⁷

This takes us back to the aspect of viewing habits: Spectators are able to perceive what is being represented as real because they are used to it, they have gone through a long learning process. Again, I quote from Christian Metz:

The filmic situation brings with it certain elements of motor inhibition, and is in this respect a kind of sleep in miniature, a walking sleep. The spectator is relatively immobile; he or she is

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 161-164.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162. English translation quoted from: Freud, Sigmund: *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in: S.F.: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol:17: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Ed. by James Strachey et al. London 1955, pp. 1-60, here p. 43.

⁶ Metz, Christian: "Der fiktionale Film und sein Zuschauer. Eine metapsychologische Untersuchung", in: *Psyche* 48:11 (1994), pp. 1004-1046, here p. 1018.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1019.

plunged into relative darkness, and, above all, he or she is not unaware of the spectacle-like nature of the film object and the institution of cinema in its historically constituted form: He or she has decided in advance to conduct him or herself as a spectator [...], a spectator and not an actor [...], for the duration of the projection he or she puts off any plan of action.⁸

And a little later he writes:

For the fictional capacity, as we too often forget, is not exclusively (or primarily) the capacity [...] to invent fiction, it is above all the historically constituted and much more widespread existence of a regime of socially regulated psychical functioning, which is rightly called fiction.⁹

And:

The diegetic cinema as an institution could not function [...] if the spectator, already 'prepared' by the older arts of representation [...] and by the Aristotelian tradition of Western art in general, were not able to systematically adopt and renew at will the special regime of perception that we are trying to analyze here in Freudian terms.¹⁰

Spectators know how to behave in the theater and in the cinema and therefore feel like they are in a secure and comfortable position most of the time. They are not an active part of what is happening before them, whether it is on stage or on screen because, after all, these are only images. But what happens if this comfortable situation changes and becomes uncanny?

In September 2014, Romeo Castellucci staged the piece *Neither* by Samuel Beckett and Morton Feldmann at the Ruhrtriennale Festival in Bochum. In its spatial composition, the audience was seated in the galleries of the proscenium stage apparatus, looking down on what was happening in front of them on stage. *Neither* is an opera that was written by Morton Feldman after he received the one-page piece by Samuel Beckett. The only voice that can be heard is a soprano. The staging can be considered spectacular in many ways. It contained scenes where the spectators' usual viewing habits were put to the test: On stage there was a horse, a cat and an infant, i.e. different acting beings that are supposed to be difficult to stage because they defy the control of the director. The costumes and props resembled those of the 1920s, which was why the piece seemed to take place in a different time. At the beginning of the evening, the piece was introduced with the thought experiment known as

⁸ Ibid., p. 1020.

⁹ Ibid., p. 1022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“Schrödinger’s Cat”. The sound did not vary much, and the main emphasis of the staging was creating scenic images on stage that resembled cinematic projections, which blurred as soon as they were perceived by the spectator. As a result, many spectators became tired, almost falling asleep. This can be seen as one of the first points at which the audience was forced to unconsciously break with the theater conventions of the proscenium stage, as falling asleep is usually considered impolite.

In his essay, *The Uncanny*,¹¹ Freud writes that the uncanny, in German *das Unheimliche*, is derived from the German word *heimlich*, meaning familiar, native or domestic, but also secret. “Unheimlich”, Freud writes “is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich.”¹² But what exactly does this mean and how can we think of it in theatrical situations or terms?

One of the conditions where the human being is confronted with the uncanny is the “dread of castration”¹³. This is a primal childhood fear, as Freud demonstrates in his essay about the uncanny by analyzing *The Sandman* by E.T.A Hoffmann.¹⁴ In Castellucci’s piece, castration anxiety was employed when a young woman loses her leg. The audience saw her leg in front of her microphone while she was sitting at the back of the stage. At the end of the piece, the woman stood up and walked off stage. At that moment, the spectator could not see where the woman’s actual leg was hidden. Was it somewhere beneath her dress? During the applause, the audience then saw two women who looked very much alike coming on stage. One was walking on two legs, the other on one leg. Castellucci used the motif of the doppelganger to confuse his audience. The doppelganger motif combined with castration anxiety was also used in an earlier scene where doctors cut open a doll in surgery to remove its organs. Freud writes about the doppelganger while analyzing the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann:¹⁵

¹¹ Freud, Sigmund: *Das Unheimliche*, in: S.F.: *Studienausgabe. Vol. 4: Psychologische Schriften*. Ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich/Angela Richards/James Strachey. Frankfurt am Main 1972, pp. 241-274.

¹² English translation quoted from: Freud, Sigmund: *The “Uncanny”*. Transl. by Alix Strachey, p. 4. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt, in which it wore a friendlier aspect. The 'double' has become a vision of terror [...]¹⁶.

Freud writes further on – and this will lead us back to Christian Metz –: “[...] [A]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.”¹⁷

I would like to suggest that Castellucci was aware of the apparatus of the proscenium stage and was therefore able to alienate the spectator from his or her own viewing habits, creating an uncanny atmosphere. Of course, not all aspects of the uncanny have been mentioned and some have been skipped, for example, Freud's explanation of the relationship between the uncanny and animism. Let us look at two final quotes related to the topic of the uncanny and at what I consider to have been the climax of this piece. At one point, Freud writes that many situations in literature cannot be considered uncanny as they are fictional. He writes:

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story. But in this case, too, he can increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing events which never or rarely happen in fact. [...] We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences [...].¹⁸

Such an event occurred during the climax of the piece where reality, viewing habits and viewing expectations were blurred and a direct reference to Lumière's film was made: A train came from the back of the stage moving forward towards the audience. If this had been a typical scene on a proscenium stage, the train would have stopped in front of the audience. In *Neither*, it did not. It moved forward until it reached the galleries, moving them back instantly, creating a situation that was not expected by the spectators, which therefore completely broke with their viewing habits for the proscenium stage: transforming something that is known into something unknown, something *heimlich* in the sense of domestic and familiar into something uncanny and

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

frightening: “[t]he ego” realizes that it “is not master in its own house.”¹⁹ For Freud, repressed childhood memories that are part of the unconscious in the present reappear. Those childhood memories are responsible for the uncanny feeling the spectator feels when watching a piece, in this case Castellucci’s *Neither*. The spectator realizes that the reality taking place in front of him or her is fictional. He or she has to deal with fears from an earlier stage of his or her life. *Neither* managed to make spectators rethink their viewing situation, making them feel less comfortable and questioning their egos on the proscenium stage. At the beginning of *Neither*, the shape of a house at the back of the stage was visible. In front of that shape was what appeared to be a living room. With the proceeding story, the shape of the house moved forward, creating disorder by moving the furniture away from the way it was at the beginning of the piece. The *heimlich* proceeded towards the *unheimlich* and reached its peak with the train entering the realm of the spectators.

¹⁹ Freud, Sigmund: “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis”, in: S.F.: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 17*. Op. cit., pp. 140-143, here p. 143.

Referenzen

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Heymann, Carolin: „Freud’s Uncanny and the Proscenium Stage. Thoughts on the Ego in Theater“, in: Matthias Dreyer, Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, Julia Schade, Marten Weise (Hg.): *Kafka und Theater* (Thewis. Online-Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft, Jg. 2017 / Vol. 6 / Ausg. 1), S. 137-143, DOI 10.21248/thewis.6.2017.130