

**PL322 : The Uncanny - Literature, Psychology, Philosophy and Technology**

Classes meet **Tuesday and Friday, 15:45-17:15**

Location: **TBA**

Seminar Leader: Dr. Gilad Nir

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Office Hours: **Tuesday, 17:15 -18:00 or by appointment.**

Location: **P98.0.08**

### **Course Description**

The experience of the uncanny arises when the familiar and ordinary comes to appear mysterious and threatening. Things are not as they appear; inanimate objects seem to come alive and living beings seem like mere automata; everyday actions lose their meaningfulness, and the social roles we usually play come to seem pointless and absurd.

The emergence of the uncanny as a topic in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century coincides with the growing sense of alienation, brought about by the industrial revolution and by the transition from traditional forms of life to modern, urban societies. In the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the uncanny became a key concept in psychology, literary studies, dramaturgy, film, art, and philosophy. And in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, technological advancements in the fields of robotics, artificial intelligence, and computer graphics have been said to once again make the experience of the uncanny a pervasive feature of our lives.

In the seminar we will first trace the depiction of the uncanny in romantic and gothic literature (Hoffmann, Poe, Lovecraft, Anderson, Maupassant, Kafka, Tolstoy, James), attending to the network of overlapping concepts— the strange, the double, the automatic, the horrific— alongside which the uncanny appears. We will also consider more recent literature (Saunders, Machado and Sims) and film (Ewers, Oswald, Lynch, Scott).

Alongside these materials we will consider how the phenomenon has been approached by psychologists and psychoanalysts, and observe how the uncanny relates to childhood psychology, to trauma, to nightmares, and to the experience of the holy, as well as to phenomena like anxiety, repetition compulsion and the abject (Freud, Rank, Jones, Otto, Lacan, Dolar, Cixous and Kristeva).

In the field of aesthetic theory, we will trace the uncanny to philosophical discussions of the sublime (Kant, Burke), consider the question why it is that we enjoy horror (Carroll), and look at the manifestations of the uncanny in romantic painting (Goya, Blake, Fuseli, Böcklin, Weber, Friedrich) in surrealist art (Bellmer), and in photography (Arbus, Wall, Crewdson). We will then discuss the way the uncanny has been harnessed in the theory of alienating effect in literature and theater (Shklovsky, Brecht).

The philosophical significance of the uncanny will first be approached by discussing idea, going back to Marx, that the alienation of modern society marks our age as an age of uncanny, ghostly appearances, and the idea, in Heidegger, that the experience of the uncanny opens up the possibility of authentic agency. We will see that in sociology, it has become an imperative for the researcher to

take up the point of view from which society appears uncanny (Gunderson). Our exploration of the philosophical significance of the uncanny continues with a discussion of skepticism and the problem of other minds (Descartes, Wittgenstein, Cavell). Against this background, we will conclude the seminar by reflecting on the importance of the uncanny in understanding the implications of recent technological advancements in robotics and artificial intelligence (Mori, Salvesen, Hui).

## Course Requirements

### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

### Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Any further absences require the instructor's permission.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

## Assessment

### Assignments

1. **Reading log**, consisting of reflections and questions relating to the readings for *each* session. Each response should be no longer than 100 words. Students may skip up to four responses. The responses are ungraded, but failing to submit them will result in loss of points for participation (see below).
2. **Midterm paper**, 1200 words, due 24.10.2024.  
- Topics for the paper will be provided by the instructor
3. **Final paper**, 3000 words, due 20.12.2024 (For graduating seniors: 13.12.2024)  
- A one-page proposal is due on 6.12.2024 and will be discussed in class in the last week of the seminar.

### Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed

upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

### Grade Breakdown

Final paper, 40% of the final grade.

Midterm paper, 20% of the final grade.

Participation and attendance, including submission of the reading logs and the final paper proposal: 40% of the final grade.

### Schedule

Week	Topics	Tuesday session	Friday session
1 Sep 3,6	The Sandman	Introduction  Background readings:  Mori, "Uncanny Valley"	E.T.A. Hoffman: "The Sandman"
2 Sep 10, 13	The Uncanny; Nightmares	Freud: "The Uncanny"	Freud: "The Uncanny" (cont.) Jones, <i>Nightmares</i> (Excerpts: 73-81, 98-107)
3 Sep 17, 20	The Automaton; the Doppelganger	E.T.A. Hoffman: "Automata"  Excerpts from:  Descartes, Poe, Wittgenstein  Film excerpt: Fellini's <i>Casanova</i>	Andersen "The Shadow" Poe, "William Wilson"  Optional materials:  Otto Rank, <i>Double: A Psychoanalytic Study</i> , pp. 3-33  Film: <i>The Student of Prague</i> (Ewers / Rye / Wegener .1913, 41 minutes)
4 Sep 24, 27	The Uncanny and the Sublime	Burke, On the Beautiful and the Sublime (excerpts)  Paintings by: Goya, Blake, Fuseli, Böcklin, Weber, Friedrich	Kant, Analytic of the sublime (excerpts)
5 Oct 1, 4	The Numinous; Horror and Abjection	Otto: <i>The Idea of the Holy</i> (excerpts)	Kristeva - <i>The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection</i> (excerpt: Approaching Abjection, pp.1-32 )  Photography by: Hans Bellmer, Diane Arbus, Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson
6 Oct 8, 11	The Gothic; Cosmic Terror	Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher" Poe, "The Black Cat" Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart"  Optional material:  Film: <i>Unheimliche Geschichten</i> , Oswald, 1919, part 3	Lovecraft "Call of Cthulu"  Optional reading:  Maupassant "La Horla"

7 Oct 18, 21	The Paradox of Horror	Carroll, <i>The Philosophy of Horror</i> – excerpts	<b>Film+Discussion:</b>  Lynch, <i>Mulholland Drive</i>
	<b>FALL BREAK</b>	<b>FALL BREAK</b>	<b>FALL BREAK</b>
8 Oct 29, Nov1	Alienation: the Uncanny in the Age of Capitalism	Marx - <i>Writings on Alienation</i> (excerpts)	Camus, <i>Myth of Sisyphus</i> , (excerpt) Sartre, <i>The Nausea</i> (excerpt) Rilke, Notes of <i>Malte Laurids Brigge</i> (excerpt)
9 Nov 5, 8	The Aesthetics of Estrangement	Shklovsky: Art as Device  Optional readings:  Tolstoy – “Strider”	Brecht: “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting”; “The Street Scene”; “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which produces an Alienation Effect”
10 Nov 12, 15	The Authentic Uncanny	Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”  Heidegger, “Antigone on the Human Being as the Uncanniest”	<b>Film + Discussion:</b>  Antonioni, <i>The passenger</i>  [Discussion with Guest Lecturer]
11 Nov 19, 22	The Sociological Uncanny	Gunderson - <i>Making the Familiar Strange: Sociology Contra Reification</i> (Ch 1)	Gunderson - <i>Making the Familiar Strange: Sociology Contra Reification</i> (Ch 4)
12 Nov 26, 29	Skepticism and the uncanny (1)	Cavell – “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” (1)	Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” (2)
13 Dec 3, 6	Skepticism and the uncanny (2)	Jonadas Techio, “Seeing Souls: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the “Problem of Other Minds””	<b>Film + Discussion:</b>  Ridley Scott, <i>Blade Runner</i>
14 Dec 10, 13	Contemporary Uncanny: Robotics, Deepfakes and AI	Mori, “Uncanny Valley” Salvesen, “Confirm that You are Human”	Hui, “ChatGPT or the Eschatology of Machines”  Naomi Klein: <i>Doppelganger</i> (excerpts)

### Additional Suggested readings

Week 2:

Cixous, “A reading of Freud's Uncanny”  
Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night”: Lacan and the Uncanny”

Week 4:

Erickson, “Uncanny Prosthetics”

Week 5:

Krauss, *L'amour fou*, excerpts

Week 6:

Ralickas, "Cosmic Horror" and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft

Week 10:

Withy: *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*

Week 12:

Fried: “Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday”

Week 14:  
Burwick, "Uncanny Valley: Hoffmann, Freud, Mori"