

# THAT STRANGE FEELING

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The uncanny as defined by Freud is that which is uncomfortably strange finds a special kind of resonance with various kinds of technological media. This paper discusses how different kinds of technologies can evoke the uncanny, while tracing the emergence of electricity as a kind of uncanny phenomena to more contemporary instances of the technological uncanny in the work of various artists and other assorted pop cultural references.

Technology has long had the ability to evoke and bring to life notions of the uncanny, the history of electricity itself has been associated with the territory of the inanimate and animate in a variety of ways. A catalyst for a state between that which is living but should be dead, the familiar made unfamiliar, together with providing aesthetic feelings of dread, horror and given to feelings of distress.

Perhaps one of the most striking and memorable experiences of the uncanny and electricity occurred on a personal level on visiting an exhibition with my at the time one year old daughter featuring the work of artist Tony Oursler. On entering the darkened room of the gallery and upon seeing one of Oursler's familiar 'electronic effigies' of projected video onto a small mannequin, all was calm as both myself and my young daughter contemplated Oursler's piece. However once the video started to move and talk, my daughter let out a blood curdling scream of sheer and all consuming terror, which I haven't witnessed since. Clearly she was disturbed by what she believed to be an inanimate object, ie: a doll, suddenly come to life, however the uncanny effect was more so seeing her react in such an extreme and distressing way.

The experience on viewing the Oursler piece with my child, became doubly uncanny, his work was already playing with notions of uncanniness, of the inanimate made animate through the ethereal and ghostly effects of video projection onto anthropomorphized dolls. The intense emotional reaction my daughter had on viewing Oursler's piece was as if she herself were possessed. Such an episode recalls Freud's notion of epileptic seizures and of madness having their origin in the uncanny, of the body being momentarily taken over or possessed, indeed the middle ages saw such behaviors as ascribed to demonic influences. [1] Like the prisoner on death row, their body on the receiving end of 2500 volts, the epileptic seizure is uncanny in its appearance, in recalling the violet surge of the body electrocuted, electricity not as the spark of life, but death. The epileptic fit a kind of uncanny living death, that one recovers from. As the body slips over into another state of being, the nerve cells that transmit electrical impulses of the brain, momentarily disrupted.

For Freud the doll holds a special place in the corridors of the uncanny, in particular when dolls appear alive. [2] Freud has outlined children live in an animistic world, where the line drawn between living things and lifeless toys is a blurry one. Children engage with their dolls as if they were alive, while adults are often unsettled by things that oscillate between life and death, as the doll, or mannequin momentarily appears as a living entity, activating our uncanny senses.

1890 saw the release of one very strange and uncanny doll indeed, known as Edison's talking doll. The doll featured a miniature phonograph embedded inside. These "talking" baby dolls were possibly the

first attempt at using sound technology in toys. As Gaby Wood has pointed out, the capturing and reproduction of speech in the early phonograph was integrally linked to finding a casing for it in human form. [3]

Edison's talking doll however was a disaster for the inventor, production delays and poor recording technology and damages to the toys when they were distributed. Combined with a recording of a voice that sounded entirely strange and otherworldly, which did more to creep children out. Edison would later refer to the dolls as his "little monsters".

Erik Davis too has pointed out today's realistic "Real Baby" dolls are a weird mix of servo motors, electronics, and that imaginative zone of the uncanny. [4] Programmed to simulate real infants, The Real baby doll, can poop its pants and fart, as basic bodily functions take on a strange, electronically mediated life for their attentive real life baby mothers.

Mark Dery sees "The Home Shopping Network's Gallery of Dolls as a televised infomercial for Freud's uncanny", featuring an array of disturbing, lifelike collectible porcelain dolls. Their transfixed gazes frozen for all time in a "queasy mix of sentimentality and side show grotesquery" [5] glaring at us through televisions unflinching electronic stare.

From televised transmissions of the uncanny doll and uncanny sound technology to the uncanny phenomena of electricity itself. In 18th century England electricity was an ongoing preoccupation with many. Benjamin Franklin the American politician and inventor, presented a paper in 1751 at the Royal Society putting forward the idea that lightning was an electrical force. As the new world was being discovered, so too was the discovery of various new and exotic animals, one of which was shipped to London in 1774: The electric eel. Combining the absorbing preoccupation of the uncanny wonder of electricity together with the strange, and almost otherworldly new species which could emit an electric charge. The electrical eel also saw the bizarre and popular craze in London of 1775 of electric eel parties, which saw gatherings to see how many people could feel the electrical eel charge, as people joined hands shocks would be felt by all. [6]

The technological uncanny too finds its home in medical equipment, devices for keeping the body from slipping over into death. The medical machine infused with a high degree of uncanniness and certainly downright creepiness as Bruce Grenville has pointed out is the iron lung. [7] The machine embrace of the iron lung, once the only way to assist individuals whose chest muscles has become progressively damaged by polio. The Iron lung has many connections to the uncanny, the undead body being kept alive by the assistance of a machine designed to expand and contract the chest. Not to mention the associations of the machine and its relationship to the unsettling fear of a horrific and devastating infectious disease, as if somehow the iron lung embodied the disease of polio within itself. However perhaps it is the notion of the iron lung as a kind of perverse cyborgian architecture, the notion of the body being controlled by a force outside of itself.

Andy Warhol's Big Electric Chair from 1967, also understands the idea of a technology that can embody an unsettling quality and provides us with an aesthetic quality that arouses a feeling of absolute dread. Warhol's iconic image revealed that aspect of the uncanny, where something is seen which is normally hidden from view: Death by electrocution, planting the seed of the electric chair in the popular consciousness as a technological object imbued with a devastating fear.

Electricity can create life, as easily as it can destroy it, capable of transforming the inanimate into the animate and back again. For some time too it was believed it could also heal the sick and the diseased. Electrotherapy has a long history in early 20th century medical practices, in particular the galvanic bath, of soaking in electricity infused bath water for a cure all. To electro shock therapy, now renamed as Electroconvulsive therapy, a psychiatric treatment in which seizures are electrically induced into the patients brain. Early electro shock therapy often resulted in extreme side effects, of seizures, and turning patients into a vegetative state, as consciousness slipped over into that uncanny space between being alive and dead.

It is the Alternative Health fraternity that have carried the torch for electrotherapy in recent years. Which puts forward the belief that the human body is composed of negative and positive electrical energy, indeed all living matter carries with it an electrical charge. The appearance of the electrical zapper, for the user to wear, which literally zaps the users body with an electrical current to rid the body's internal organs of pathogens and disease, renders the body as an uncanny conduit for electrical impulses.

I sing the body electric and electricity as that life-force which one takes for granted, as a bringer of death, life, re-animation and health and perhaps most of all as an activator of that mysterious terrain of the imagination known as the uncanny.

#### **References and Notes:**

1. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Hogarth Press, 1919).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
4. Erik Davis, "Congratulations it's a Bot," (originally appearing in *Wired* magazine, 2000) <http://www.techgnosis.com/chunkshow-single.php?chunk=chunkfrom-2005-08-21-1353-0.txt> (accessed April 19th, 2011).
5. Mark Dery, "The unheimlich Manuever," 1997, <http://www.suck.com/daily/97/03/28> (accessed January 11th, 2011).
6. Wendy Moore, *The Knife Man, Blood, Body-snatching and the birth of modern surgery* (London: Bantam Press, 2005).
7. Bruce Grenville, *The uncanny: experiments in cyborg culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).