

# THE UNCANNY



There is a sense of the uncanny to the village in Scotland that has been discovered to go back 5,500 years. [\[Link\]](#)





Ralph Waldo Emerson: *English Traits, Stonehenge*: “We walked in and out, and took again and again a fresh look at the uncanny stones.” (1856).

The Uncanny?

The return of what is no longer the same.

For Freud, a return of the repressed. [Here is an extract.]

The hauntingly familiar – strange, but reminiscent.

*Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992). Dracula has arrived in London. He contrives a meeting, accidentally in the street, with Mina, having recognised her back home in Transylvania from Harker’s photograph. She hesitates to show him the new science of the cinematograph. Mina to the Count – “Who are you? – I know you”. His reply – “ I have crossed oceans of time to find you”. The recognition, after centuries, and through metempsychosis, that she was once his lover; his loss; and rediscovery.

Sublime horror.

The uncanny is disruption – of time; a fracturing, splitting, or doubling of subjectivity; a deconstructive repetition-with-a-difference.

The images above are from Nigel Kneale's (Quatermass and The Pit) classic but little known "Stone Tape" (1972, directed Peter Sasdy, now available from the *British Film Institute*). A team of scientists discover a room in a Gothic mansion that is haunted by the recordings (in the very stone fabric) of events layered back into millennia, back to a prehistoric megalithic and horrific experience.

For Steven King the uncanny is (similarly) haunted real estate.

The unhomelike – Das Unheimliche. Unheimlichkeit, the uncanny, breaks down roughly into "un-home-like-ness."

The streets of London.



With the archaeological uncanny comes that abhorrence of the positive that I was talking about on Friday. We should think of a negativity that requires a recognition of the discontinuity of the past and the paradox of the double.

Doppelgänger. Dorian Gray. How would you recognize your double? Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) – they arrive in San Francisco from outer space. People take the strange new flowers home, and when they sleep alien doubles take their place. Doubles may be zombies, automata or cyborgs. We fear the artificial alter-ego. The Uncanny is at the heart of the ethics of biotechnology and cloning. Never mind AI.

And the double that is the photograph. (But it never really looks like you – or it photogenetically reflects you in better light.) The hyper-realist sculpture. George Segal's figures. A sense of déjà vu.

The Uncanny is the simulacrum – an exact copy of an original that never existed.  
BMW's new Mini.

Tzvetan Todorov connects the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous. He defines the fantastic as a genre which generates hesitation in the reader's mind. He asserts the necessity of three conditions for the fantastic: the reader must hesitate between a natural and supernatural interpretation, a character usually represents this hesitation and the reader adopts a nonallegorical reading. We are in liminal spaces. In Coppola's Dracula, Mina meets the Count at a showing of the new "movies" – uncanny science. She hesitates, but accepts his offer of joining him in the un-dead. Lover and monster. She hesitates in his murder. Recognition, after hesitation, of the double. Precisely.

Giorgio de Chirico worked on the silence, solitude and obscurity of deserted Italian piazze, urban landscapes – a curious amalgam of aesthetic sentiment and psychic distress. He preferred to use the word "presentiment", but his confusion of animate and inanimate – he described statues in public places as particularly evocative because they seemed to have the potential to rise and enter the world of men, especially at twilight – is precisely what Freud had described as the primary criterion for the generation of the Uncanny.

Never feeling at home in the world – Novalis on philosophy (if my memory serves right). This is archaeology.