

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNCANNY



Gabriel Moshenska has sent me his recent and very neat article about the archaeological uncanny in the ghost stories of MR James.

Gabriel is quite right, I think, to highlight the connection between Freud's *unheimlich*, ghosts, and the haunting persistence, sometimes malevolent, of the past – MR James made much of the curses that can befall those who disturb the past.

In his wide-ranging discussion of the uncanny Freud draws on literary tropes rather than archaeological

allusions, although he notes *inter alia* that, quoting Schelling, “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 1995: 126); indeed an alternative and more common meaning of the German word *heimlich* is ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’. The architectural theorist Anthony Vidler seizes on this theme of unwelcome revelation to draw out the archaeological dimension, arguing that “archaeology and the archaeological act is by definition an ‘uncanny’ act which reveals that which should have remained hidden” (Vidler 1992: 48). Where Vidler’s and other discussions of the uncanny in archaeology have focused on abjection and nausea in the dead, decayed and buried traces of everyday life, an alternative formulation locates the uncanny not in the property of burial but in the process of excavation and revelation:

The material remains of the past are not alien or uncanny in themselves. Rather, it is the excavation and revelation of these objects in contexts of burial and decay that alienates them and creates a sense of the uncanny (Moshenska 2006: 93).

Thus the archaeological act, in the Freudian model as

in the Jamesian narrative, is transgressive in what it reveals. Freud conceptualised archaeology as investigative and largely ignored its uncanny dimensions, while James drew upon these same themes repeatedly and productively. Both used their own experiences and encounters with archaeological sites and materials to illustrate and illuminate their writings. Here, however, the connection between the two near-contemporaries breaks down, as Cowlshaw perceptively notes:

Freud sought actively to dig down through the layers of memory, uncover repressed memories, reconstruct the history stored in the unconscious fragments, and use that history, once brought to the patient's consciousness, to facilitate psychoanalytic cure. James, in contrast, indicates that digging into the past/the unconscious is a mistake: the results are invariably horrifying and sometimes even fatal If James' antiquarians would only let sleeping ruins lie, they would remain safe (Cowlshaw 2007: 173).

In short, James believes in leaving buried what Freud would have us excavate and confront. James and Freud tug their archaeologists in opposite directions: for

Freud the archaeologist is to be emulated, for James he is to be punished.



Here is an image from my portfolio "Ghosts in the mirror". It is a detail of a daguerreotype, an early form of photography that used light-sensitized silver-mirrored plates. More about this project in rephotography/remediation/media archaeology – [\[Link\]](#) – soon to appear as a book. Gallery – [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#)

I am also reminded of something I wrote in my book *Experiencing the Past* back in 1992 when I was struggling to make sense of what I had come to call the archaeological imagination –

I have been discussing horror and abjection, and moved on to non-identity – that the past is not what it has become, that there is always incongruity between the remains of the past, what they were, and what we can say about them:

In the excavation the raw existence of the past is impenetrable. The sands and rubbles are merely what they are. Absurdity, not fitting with reason. They are beyond, transcendent. And with the loss of tradition (and the death of God) there are no answers to this element of beyond. It is the nausea of the physical existence of the self confronted with what it will become. Morbidity and decay.

The particularity of what I find is fascinating, unsayable, uncanny. It is dis-covery, uncovering what was hidden, showing our homely and familiar categories and understanding to be insufficient. It also declares a gap between what I find and what is said of it. The uncanny is a confrontation with absence; the pot is not what it is. Here is a hidden lack of being. It is death. The sands and rubbles are merely what they are and absolute signification or meaning never arrives. The only absolute signifier is death.

Archaeology excavates a hollow. There is an emptiness. The raw existence of the past is not enough,

insufficient in itself. Waiting for an epiphany is in vain. What is needed is our desire to fill the hollow, raise the dead. This is archaeology's necromancy.

Gabriel too connects the notion of the uncanny with the dynamic, the *process* of uncovering the past.

Quite coincidentally we have just received the BBC versions of some of these MR James stories that were presented as Christmas specials in the UK starting back in the 1970s.