The Uncanny Home: Television, Transparency and Overexposure*

Scott McQuire
Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia

The House that Gates Built

I recently read a description of the house which is currently being built for Microsoft cyber-baron Bill Gates. Gates conceived his new residence as a state of the art merging of computer technology with architecture. At an estimated cost of $50 million, the house will naturally boast all the standard automated functions such as climate control and electronic security systems, as well as a few extras like a hot tub which switches itself on as soon as the master’s car enters the grounds.

But what I found most striking about the Gates house was its walls. Gates’ original plan called for interior walls consisting of a series of massive floor to ceiling video screens. In some cases, like the trampoline room, the 360 degree panorama was to be supplemented with an additional screen in the ceiling. All these screens could be programmed, according to any guest’s wishes, with digitized works of art selected from their host’s virtual collection. The duration of the displayed images could be tailored to each guest’s attention span, while the different rooms they entered, accessed via personal electronic security PINs, would never repeat the same picture.

Reading this description gave me a sensation which could best be described as uncanny. Of course, wall size TV screens are familiar creations of science fiction, and have been featured in numerous films such as François Truffaut’s Fahrenheit 451 (1966) and Paul Verhoeven’s Total Recall (1990). In fact, as it turns out wall size screens are much easier to simulate in films – it’s just a matter of rear projection – than they are to produce materially and architecturally. Lamenting the fact that the hardware for projecting large scale images with sufficiently high definition has not yet been perfected, Gates has been forced to scale down his ambitious plans. At last report he had to content himself with a twelve foot wide video wall in the reception area.

There are several points we might note in relation to this scenario. The first is the way that imagination and desire continually outstrip technology. Everyone knows that computers have undergone a period of extraordinarily rapid development. To give one point of reference, in the first issue of Wired, Frederic Davis speculated that, “had automobile technology advanced at a similar pace over the last 20 years, your car would travel at 500,000 miles an

* This article is based on a paper presented at “Home: Place, Space, and the Domestic” held at the University of Western Sydney (Nepean) in 1995.
hour, get a million miles to the gallon, and only cost a measly $1000” (Davis 30). Yet despite this dizzying velocity of technological change in a realm where the changes are themselves all about speed, many people remain impatient and frustrated that things don’t move even faster. In fact, we often find ourselves waiting for technology to catch up to where imagination has already taken us. A recent example is the wave of enthusiasm that surrounded VR technologies in the early 1990s. As anyone who has used a pair of EyePhones knows, the experience is fascinating but falls a long way short of the total perceptual hallucination promised in a film like Lawnmower Man. Certainly there is industry hype at work here, but there is also a kind of longing, a technological yearning, which we need to recognize as part of the motor driving the ideology of progress.

For all these reasons, I wanted to try to dislodge my response to the Gates house from the now familiar trajectory in which yesterday’s science fiction becomes today’s reality. The issue is a lot more complex than the neat succession that this kind of narrative promotes. Instead, I want to read the Gates house as a metaphor for the generally unsettling effect exercised by electronic media on the contemporary home. Of course, “home” needs to be heard here as more than a physical structure, but also as designating a sense of cultural belonging and existential shelter. However, it is important to try and hold the physical and the psychological together, without simply collapsing them into one another. There is a sense in which the spatial mutations affecting contemporary architecture – the way in which we gain access to a building, the notion of passage between rooms, the proximity of separate sites, and so on – are critically linked to the instability in contemporary thought and experience which affects identity, representation and subjectivity.

In this sense, the crisis of Grand Narratives which Lyotard posed as the fundamental condition of postmodernity can be understood very much as a crisis of boundary, reference and dimension. How do we demarcate inside and outside? What are the coordinates of the near and the far? What happens when here and there are no longer held apart, but threaten to collapse into one another? Questions such as these exert a profound impact on the way in which we can define “home” in the present, whether at the level of the private dwelling, the industrial city or the radically dispersed communities which make up the “homelands” of contemporary nation-states. The older geographical question “where is my home?” has been displaced by a newer question: “What is the meaning of home?”

A key point of departure for any analysis of this kind is to see the way in which electronic communication technologies such as telephone, television, and computer have always proceeded simultaneously along the axes of universalization and individualization. The globalization of telecommunications flow goes hand in hand with the reorganization of the space of domestic life, including the micro-politics of the family. In fact, the most significant change is that where these fronts or frontiers – domestic, local,
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It is from this perspective that I want to pose the question: what does it mean today to be “at home”? Does this still correspond to a particular location, site or territory – or rather, to a particular sense of situation, of locatedness, of cultural belonging? More to the point, how might we plot the coordinates or demarcate the boundaries of our homes in the present? Philosopher Mircea Eliade once suggested that home was established “at the heart of the real.” In the unstable oscillations of the real and its simulacra – the parallel worlds of media images, screen doubles, live television, virtual reality experiences, and the like – we can feel the ambiguous headings which today affect the homeliness of our homes.

Freud and the Uncanny

In his well known essay on “The Uncanny," Freud traces the etymology of the German term das Unheimlich. Unheimlich is often translated as “uncanny” but could be more literally rendered as unhomely, and it is this double sense that I find most suggestive here. For Freud, the sensation of the uncanny is not caused by what is strange or unfamiliar. Rather, it arises when the known and the familiar are made strange. Uncanniness is a disturbed domesticity, the return of the familiar in an apparently unfamiliar form. Elsewhere in his essay, Freud approvingly quotes Schelling who defines the uncanny as the bringing to light of that which ought to have remained hidden (Freud 241). Uncanniness thus belongs to a complex scene of veiling and unveiling, of secrecy, revelation and improper exposure.

In his discussion, Freud continually links the uncanny to the experience of ambivalence, and he offers a number of suggestive examples. The first is uncertainty as to whether an animate being is alive, or, conversely, whether an object is really inanimate: the second concerns the enigma of the Doppelgänger or double (here Freud narrates a personal experience in which he saw but did not recognize his own reflection, recalling that he thoroughly disliked what he saw); the third concerns the experience in which the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced. So, while Freud develops his concept of the uncanny in the context of Romantic literature and the nineteenth century discovery of buried cities such as Pompeii and Troy, the categories he deploys seem peculiarly suited to exploring contemporary communication technologies, particularly the way in which they can rearrange bodies, times and spaces, seemingly at will.

French architectural historian Paul Virilio once dubbed television “the third window." By this rather inspired appellation, he sought to place the TV screen in historical succession to – or rather as an historic departure from – two

1 Quoted in Berger 56.
prior windows. The first is really just an entrance or door; the single opening to a cave, room or dwelling with the primary purpose of allowing the passage of the occupants. After the door-window comes the light-window: a specialized opening which is designed primarily to facilitate the movement of light and air rather than bodies and things. This second window has a longer and complex history, but the aspect that I want to emphasize here is the way in which the light window was central to the aspirations of modernist architects such as Le Corbusier.

Writing and designing in the context of the 1920s European avant-garde, Le Corbusier saw the strip window as an ideal means of opening interior space to the outside, thereby alleviating problems of design and health alike. This possibility depended on a whole raft of technical and design innovations. Once the frame house eliminated the necessity for load bearing external walls, much greater areas of the wall could be given over to glass. For Le Corbusier, transparency was not only aesthetic and hygienic; above all, it signified the end of superstition and irrationality. The belief that rational housing would give birth to rational society courses through his work.

This moral dimension was also remarked on by Walter Benjamin in his 1929 essay on Surrealism:

To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence.
It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism that we badly need.
Discretion concerning one’s own existence, once an aristocratic virtue,
has become more and more an affair of petit bourgeois parvenus. (228)

It was in a similar vein that the great Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein proposed a film shot entirely in a glass building. According to his scenario (which, like so many of Eisenstein’s projects, was never realized) the drama revolved around invisibility and blindness giving way to reciprocal visibility: “Indifference to each other is established by showing that the characters do not see each other through the glass doors and walls because they do not look — a developed ‘non-seeing’.” But later, they “begin to see each other, to look at and pay attention to each other…. Suddenly they realize that these walls can be used” (Leyda and Voynow 36-7). For Eisenstein, as for Benjamin and Le Corbusier, transparency offered a compelling metaphor for the transformation of consciousness.

How might we situate the Gates house in relation to these scenes? Instead of a glass house, it has become a screen house, and, in many respects, this shift is emblematic of the uncertainties affecting the contemporary residence. The bourgeois home traditionally signified a place of refuge from the encroachments of urban-industrial life. As the rhythms of the modern metropolis accelerated, increasing importance was attached to the separation of private, domestic space from the public world outside. While there was always some form of exchange between the inside and the outside, the threshold was

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unmistakably physical. The house was bounded by doors, windows, gates and fences. Within these borders lay one’s own property, the space to which one claimed exclusive possession. If one closed the doors and shuttered the windows, contact with the outside would potentially cease. This vision of a tightly cloistered space appealed to the troubled surrealist Louis Soutter, who, in 1936, wrote in the journal Minotaure:

The minimum house or future cell should be in translucent glass. No more windows, those useless eyes. Why look outside? (Quoted by Vidler 151)

Why indeed?

As writ large in the Gates house, the solidity of our walls has increasingly given way to the restless luminosity of electronic screens. Looking through these strange windows we come to perceive the world as if divorced from bodily constraints. We see the world from where we are not, from where we have never been. Despite its everyday familiarity, this kind of disembodied perception — seeing from the place of an other, from many others — retains a strong sense of the uncanny. One of Freud’s primary reference points in his essay was the story of “The Sandman” by nineteenth century author E. T. A Hoffman. In Hoffman’s story, the Sandman is a quasi-mythical figure used by adults to persuade children to go to sleep. At one point, the young protagonist’s Nurse tells him: “He’s a wicked man who comes when children won’t go to bed, and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of their heads all bleeding” (Quoted by Freud 237). Sweet dreams were no doubt assured!

In his analysis of the story, Freud relates the experience of the uncanny “to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes” (Freud 230). The Freudian analogy is, of course, the ubiquitous spectre of castration. But before proceeding too rapidly to this destination, which today undoubtedly conceals as much as it reveals, it may pay to read Hoffman more literally. In many respects, the fear of being robbed of one’s eyes is akin to the spectre which has haunted modern consciousness ever since the invention of the camera. Of course, on one side, the camera has been readily inserted into the Enlightenment discourse associating light and transparency with reason and truth. This narrative assumes many guises, but none more prominent in the present than the one in which television is figured as the eye of democracy, and a more or less direct relation is plotted between the transparency desired in political representation and the transparency assumed in visual representation.

But the other, darker side of this discourse has always been the threat that photographic, cinematic or televsional prostheses will in fact replace the organ they were meant to merely supplement. In other words, that the rise of the media will effectively rob us of our own eyes. Even a century ago, when photography was first industrialized and public images began to proliferate in newspapers and on postcards, the camera’s prodigious capacity to hijack
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visual appearances and to transport them into new contexts highlighted an unnerving instability in the bond between image and referent. What was inaugurated was a crisis in visual meaning which opened a rift at the center of the positivist model of knowledge. It is important to recognize that this tension has never been resolved, merely relocated. Moreover, in this brave new era of digital imaging, the disturbance is vastly magnified. When we can literally see Michael Jackson morph into a panther or Sam Neil run from a herd of dinosaurs in Jurassic Park (1993) — in other words, when we can see what we know doesn’t exist — we have to acknowledge that both photorealism and human perception have become subject to new exigencies.

The Technological Uncanny

I would hasten to add that my concern here is not to disentangle photographic realism from image manipulation, nor to demarcate “truth” and “ideology.” I am more interested in exploring the ambivalence which resides within each of us who live with technology in new ways. Inserted directly into the heart of domestic space, devices such as the telephone, radio, television and computer, punch right through the threshold of the private residence. Instead of being defined primarily by the passage of material bodies, access to a residence increasingly depends upon the activation of a circuit. Conceiving the home as an interactive node permanently on-line to vast information flows radically alters the division and dynamics of public and private space. One result is a profound deterritorialization of the home, insofar as what we see and experience within its walls is no longer contained by their limits.

Because of their ability to interrupt established lines of household security and parental authority, electronic communication technologies have often triggered social tensions verging on panic. For a long time, the bulk of the literature written about television concerned its detrimental effects, especially on children. TV was charged with promoting bad language, bad morals, and bad habits of all kinds.7 This sort of anxiety is alive and well in films like Joe Dante’s Poltergeist (1982) in which the TV set becomes the site of demonic possession, or, more pointedly, in David Cronenberg’s Videodrome (1982) which rewrites McLuhan’s scenario of the global village as a dystopic nightmare. A similar sort of discourse has emerged around the Internet, particularly concerning the possibility of children gaining access to pornography. While not wanting to dismiss these concerns, what I’m pointing to is not so much a crisis of morality as a crisis of space — of domestic space in particular.

7The US decision in May 1995 to adopt the V-chip to enable households to filter network programming is merely the latest technological response to the media’s “invasion” of private space.

In Videodrome, the protagonist Max Renn (played by James Woods) runs Channel 83, a small cable television station. He’s looking for new product and doesn’t much care what it is as long as it attracts a niche audience. Through a series of apparent accidents, he has begun tapping into pirate broadcasts of a show called “Videodrome,” which screens only ultra-realistic depictions of torture and murder. Or perhaps it simply is torture and murder. In trying to trace the source of the show, Max comes across reports of a mysterious McLuhan-esque figure known as Professor Brian O’Blivion who only communicates via the TV screen. But when Max receives a videotape from O’Blivion strange things begin to happen. His television set begins to breathe; its screen distends into a pair of shimmering feminine lips. Mesmerized, Max is drawn closer and closer, until, in a moment of cinematic bravado, his head is entirely engulfed in the slupping, sucking non-place of cyberspace.

What makes Videodrome more interesting than run-of-the-mill films offering conspiracy theories of television as a brainwashing device are these startling evocations of what might be called the technological uncanny.8 Recalling Freud’s categories, the uncanny emerges when the difference between animate and inanimate objects blurs, affecting the possibility of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, but also upsetting accustomed spatial orientations. The fact that Videodrome codes the uncanny so overtly as feminine underlines its self-conscious Freudian derivation.

In Videodrome, Cronenberg portrays the fusion of human body and contemporary technology as a phenomenon which is both disturbing and fascinating. In different ways, this is the sort of experience that many of us now have on a daily basis. I don’t mean that we literally suffer hallucinations of being sucked in to the black hole of a gaping television screen. Rather, that the proliferation of technologies which plug directly into our sensory and perceptual functions sustain a range of encounters which fundamentally question the limits of the body and the authority of embodied perception. And it is the tendency for technology to displace the body as the privileged measure of human experience which induces what I earlier called the crisis of boundary, reference, and dimension. After the X-ray, what separates the inside and the outside? In the age of heart transplants and pacemakers, how do we distinguish between the body and the machine? With gene shears, fertility drugs and life support systems, what happens to the line between the living and the dead? All of these have become intensely ambiguous relations in the present, subjecting our modes of understanding and negotiating space to new pressures in the process.

8There are several other scenes worth mentioning, particularly those dealing with the vagina-like slit which opens up in Max’s torso. At one point he loses a gun inside it. In another scene, he is literally “played” when a male antagonist inserts a video tape into his body through this wound. Finally, Max uses it as a vagina denuata to sever the hand of another adversary. In Terminal Identitv, Scott Bukatman sets Videodrome in the context of science fiction cinema and cyberpunk literature, contemporary discourses which are particularly concerned with exploring the relationship between spatial and bodily mutation (137).
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Instead of the presumption of spatial continuity which previously framed social relations, we increasingly experience space as intermittent, discontinuous and fluctuating. In the third window, spaces appear and disappear abruptly. We can activate links between physically discontinuous sites at a moment’s notice but these conjunctions are transient and inherently unstable. Everyday events which happen in one place have instantaneous effects in another, or in a multiplicity of others, potentially impacting on sites distributed across the entire globe. In fact, with live television, the classical notion of the event comes increasingly into question. In this context, concepts such as proximity and locality take on entirely different meanings, and I think this points to a critical aspect of the technological uncanny.

The nineteenth century uncanny was often linked to dark, hidden spaces. A renowned example was Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” in which the narrator encounters the horror of a living being who has been walled up, buried alive in a house which itself assumes frightful organic qualities. It was precisely this unhealthy profusion of dark cellars, hidden recesses and musty attics which Le Corbusier sought to abolish with his modern flat-roofed residences, elevated above ground on thin pilots, surrounded by verdures, with their terraces and windows open to the endless flow of light and air. Exposure of the hidden, the bringing to light of the repressed was thought to have a healing function. It offered a way of exorcising the demons.

By contrast, the technological uncanny is less a function of hidden or invisible space than of the overexposure of space. This shift needs to be set within the emergence of contemporary media culture with its intense fascination with spectacle, particularly with the “behind the scenes” spectacle of the previously hidden space of private life. This is most obvious in relation to celebrities – royalty, movie stars, politicians and all those whose private lives have become the focus of media obsession – but it also operates with regard to the private lives of so-called ordinary people. Look at the explosion of television confessionsals in the Donahue-Oprah mold, or the importance of the camera in modern family rituals such as weddings and birthdays. But what particularly interests me here is the recurrent fascination exercised by the fantasy of observing someone else’s private life: the desire to look into the life of a total stranger.

Undoubtedly, this fantasy has been around for some time, perhaps ever since the invention of the camera. Painter and film maker Fernand Léger long ago wrote that he dreamed of a film which would record the life of a

4 Although hysteria was long considered a specifically “female” condition, Poe’s story is a compelling demonstration of the displacement of male hysteria onto both domestic space and the body of woman. Finally this madly consumes the entire Usher family. The narrator remarks that, for generations, the family’s lineage has been confined to this single domestic space. The title of the story thus assumes a double sense: the tumultuous physical collapse of the house is simultaneously the disappearance of the family name.

... man and a woman over 24 consecutive hours (Kracauer 63-64). Nothing should be omitted, nor should they ever be aware of the presence of the camera. Significantly, Léger also believed that the realization of this film would be intolerable – not because it would be boring – but because of its potential to efface the habitual line between representation and reality. I think Léger’s opinion is borne out by the intensity of the reactions to contemporary television-as-life programs such as Sylvania Waters (1992).5

Arguments over whether or not Sylvania Waters gave a true representation of the Donahue family in particular, or Australian family life in general, missed the point. Clearly, Sylvania Waters provoked something of a crisis in conventional media criticism by fusing the traditional poles of documentary and fiction. But, as many contemporary film theorists point out, all films do this in a certain way. Fiction films are always “actuality” footage of a kind – which is perhaps why we believe them up to a point – while documentaries always depend on narrative conventions – which is perhaps why we disbelieve them beyond a certain point. But, of course, the point at which belief and disbelief meet, assuming there is just one, is notoriously unstable.

For this reason, I think it is better to acknowledge that, in marrying a compelling sense of realism to a profound sense of unreality, Sylvania Waters exposed the critical instability, the wild swings between reality and unreality, which is a common experience when watching television. It is equally important to examine the scene in which this instability is revealed. While Sylvania Waters was shot in a private home, its effect is intensified by the fact that this space is today a scene of watching. Home is the place in which we all, as a radically dispersed community of privatized individuals, consume television. Sylvania Waters reflects this scene back to us, rendering it at once familiar and unfamiliar, thereby accentuating the uncanny effect of exposing or overexposing the space of domestic life.

Recalling Walter Benjamin’s comment on glass houses, when watching Sylvania Waters I must admit that I am left wondering what he would have made of the revolutionary virtue of living in that particular glass house. But, the more important point is to recognize that, with television, we are all living in glass houses. Our lives are endlessly open to the uncanny effects of being made eyewitnesses to the private lives of total strangers.

5 Sylvania Waters was a television series coproduced by the BBC and ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). It involved a camera crew filming the daily life of an extended family living in the Sydney suburb of Sylvania Waters over several months. Response to the series was mixed; fascination with the intimacy of the portrait obtained was colored by widespread public antipathy to the noveau rich qualities of certain family members, particularly the mother Notene.

6 See, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is (Not a Name),” October 52 (Spring 1990). 76-97.
Instead of the presumption of spatial continuity which previously framed social relations, we increasingly experience space as intermittent, discontinuous and fluctuating. In the third window, spaces appear and disappear abruptly. We can activate links between physically discontinuous sites at a moment’s notice, but these conjunctions are transient and inherently unstable. Everyday events which happen in one place have instantaneous effects in another, or in a multiplicity of others, potentially impacting on sites distributed across the entire globe. In fact, with live television, the classical notion of the event comes increasingly into question. In this context, concepts such as proximity and locality take on entirely different meanings, and I think this points to a critical aspect of the technological uncanny.

The nineteenth century uncanny was often linked to dark, hidden spaces. A renowned example was Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” in which the narrator encounters the horror of a living being who has been walled up, buried alive in a house which itself assumes frightful organic qualities. It was precisely this unhealthy profusion of dank cellars, hidden recesses and musty attics which Le Corbusier sought to abolish with his modern flat-roofed residences, elevated above ground on thin pilots, surrounded by verdure, with their terraces and windows open to the endless flow of light and air. Exposure of the hidden, the bringing to light of the repressed was thought to have a healing function. It offered a way of exorcising the demons.

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6 See, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” October 52 (Spring 1990). 76-97.
By way of conclusion, I will offer some brief remarks which don’t so much tie all these themes up as identify the larger context in which they need to be set. Modernity has frequently been haunted by the spectre of the loss of home. Not simply the nostalgia for the absent home so often expressed by the colonizer or the tourist, but a more apocalyptic loss of all homes, of homeliness as such. This threat, which has a material basis in the wholesale dispossession of indigenous peoples, the exile of refugees and the dispersion of migrant populations, forms the other face of the modern desire to reinvent the home by transcending its previous limits.

What is new in the present is the extent to which electronic media are not only accentuating the migratory tendencies of modernity, but are actively undermining the mode of inhabiting space and territory on which the modern world depended. With the growing ascendency of information and knowledge-based economies, physical delivery systems are being displaced all along the line by electronic networks. And with the rise of electronic networks, the traditional importance of space is vastly diminished. As long as you can tap into the network, it is irrelevant where you are. This situation generates all kinds of consequences, up to and including the fact that cultural domination is no longer so dependent on direct territorial control.

Arguably, what we are witnessing in the present is the displacement of geopolitics — a politics based on geographical distinctions such as those between country and city, center and periphery, or between local, regional, national and international spheres of action; in short, a politics of space — by what Virilio calls chronopolitics, in which social relations are increasingly based on relative speed and the technological control of time.

Clearly, this is a complex threshold which cannot be easily generalized. Telematics is an active force in the constitution of so-called “postmodern” cultures, and must be recognized as an integral part of contemporary processes of cultural hybridization. However, any attempts to construct new forms of cross-cultural relations must be undertaken in a world where the global information economy is skewed towards the West in general and the United States in particular. One difficulty in articulating this inequality is that the heroic technological optimism of McLuhan’s global village, echoed by Nicholas Negroponte’s “rosy image of the Internet, is often opposed only with reactive attempts to respond to technological change by advocating a restoration of traditional values: secure borders, certain identities, homogeneous cultures. I think the consequences of both these approaches have become all too evident this century. If the uncritical embrace of the technological imperative is likely to produce a Hollywood-Disney cultural hybrid, refusal to rethink relations between the familiar and the foreign points to equally dire consequences. Aggressive definition of a pure homeland inevitably breeds discrimination, segregation and apartheid, leading to the building of a steel wall along the US-Mexico border, the walling off of the West Bank to separate Jews and Palestinians, or the horror of ethnic cleansing operations in Bosnia.

For those of us who are not interested in returning to some older, ideal home supposedly located happily in the past, and yet remain unimpressed by the current tendencies of the virtual community as a home of the future, there is the need for an other heading. For this reason it is vital to pose the spatiotemporal interruption of new media technologies in the context of both colonial history and postcolonial critiques of the nation-state as a unified political space mirrored by a homogeneous cultural space. When neither the internal nor the external borders of the home remain secure, there is the possibility of displacing fixed stereotypes. Instead of identity being circumscribed by an originary subjectivity dictated by place of origin, our sense of home might begin to be redefined to include the overlapping, interpenetrating spaces and contradictory affiliations we inhabit in the present. This underlines the importance of engaging with and analyzing the fantasies and fears that the extension of new media technologies currently inspire. The metaphor of the uncanny proves instructive in this regard. Towards the end of his essay, Freud notes (as we might expect) that “neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning” (Freud 245). Given the difficulties which are analyzed by the Freudian text with regard to theorizing sexual difference — and which constantly return to interrupt its script — it is perhaps not surprising that Freud found himself compelled to adopt the fairy tale phrase “once upon a time” to describe this origin. Such a revision offers a parable for our relation to the so-called “global media.” For a long time, electronic media have been invested with the promise of sustaining a more inclusive and democratic “global community.” Yet, what they actually offer us at present, in the absence of any sustained analysis of cross-cultural hierarchy, difference and incomensurability, is a distorted and paradoxical glimpse of this promised future. It is this oblique vision which constitutes the third window’s most uncanny effect.

Works Cited


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Works Cited


America’s Worst Nightmare . . . Roseanne!

Nancy Batty  
Red Deer College, Alberta, Canada

Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies.  
(Horkheimer and Adorno 126)

If, as Freud says, the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” or, in Schelling’s formulation, “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (Freud 241), what, we are sure to ask, has this to do with the once popular, now defunct, situation comedy Roseanne? What is it that has remained hidden about Roseanne that has come to light this past year? In this paper I will discuss the “uncanniness” of the last season of Roseanne, a season which has departed significantly from both the tenor and the subject matter of the series as a whole by incorporating a concept that has the blue-collar Conner family winning $108 million in a state lottery. It was a bold move for a series that has prided itself on its realistic portrayals of a working class family, but a move which, in at least one critic’s view, should have been particularly serendipitous in that it brought “Roseanne Conner, who began as her creator’s comfortable alter ego, closer to the real Roseanne” (James). Instead, the millionaire plot resulted in steadily declining ratings and almost universally negative critical notices for the final season of the series.

Through a reading of precisely the doubling or Doppelgänger effect that James alludes to above, I hope to show that the effect of Roseanne’s creative decisions over the past year has proven to be decidedly disturbing for viewers and critics, as material changes to the domestic context of the series destabilize our reading not just of Roseanne Conner, sit-com character, but of Roseanne, the controversial celebrity who created her. Paradoxically, the millionaire plot line at once intensifies the identification of Roseanne Conner with the actor who has become wealthy portraying her, while at the same time creating an alienating effect. I think, what Freud would call an “uncanny” one:

I’d like to thank Tonja Snell for her research assistance and her suggestions on an early draft of this paper. I’d also like to thank Mike Arnn for his patience and advice throughout the process. The title of this essay is taken from Tom Arnold’s observation that he and Roseanne were “America’s worst nightmare – white trash with money” (cited in Salisbury).

Roseanne has dropped former surnames Barr and Arnold. Throughout the article, I will refer to the single name Roseanne when speaking about the actor, Roseanne Conner when speaking about the sit-com character.