

ENCOUNTERS OF THE UNCANNY KIND AT *THE* *ORIGIN OF THE* *NEW WORLD*

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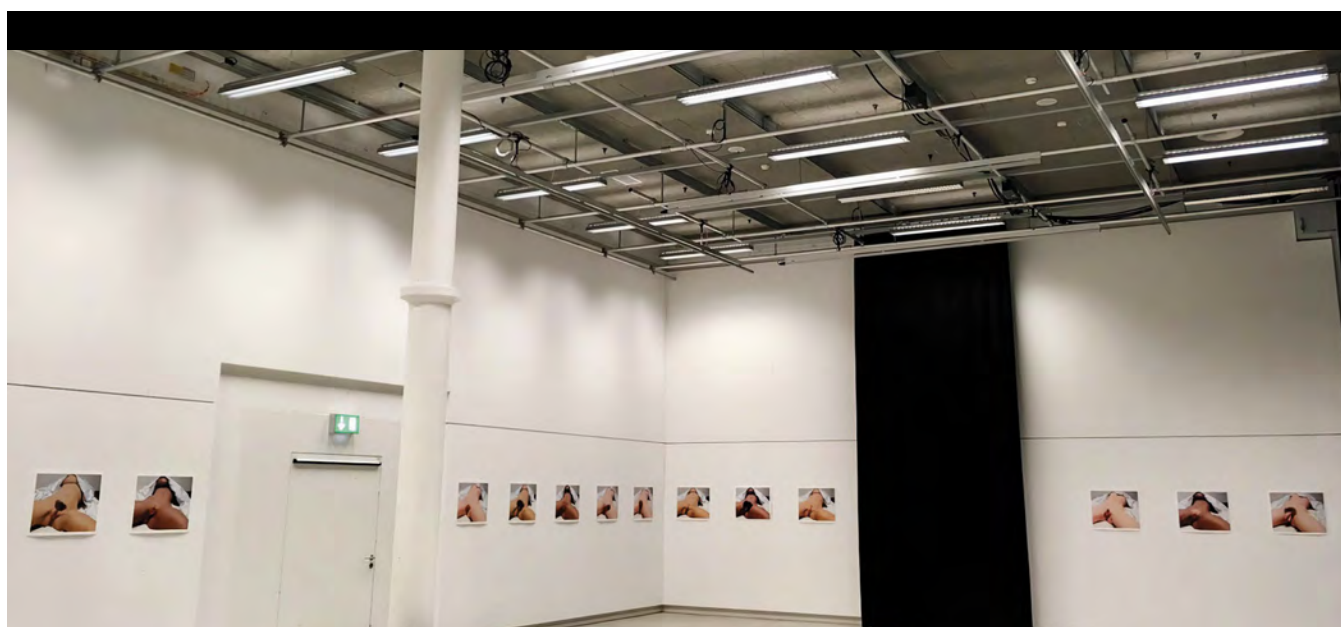
Since the age of Enlightenment, women have been systematically associated with nature, irrationality and the so-called “domestic sphere”, men in a binary opposition with rationality, rational knowledge and public leadership. This is by no means an accident of history. Rather, the discourse of nature and the emerging shift of epistemological paradigms from mechanistic to physiologist and biologist approaches and the resulting humanistic anthropomorphism, which favoured the “human subject” of liberal humanist thought, rendered the hitherto relative and markedly socio-politically argued subjection of women since early modern times into an essential necessity, a truth, now based on women’s irreducible “nature”, by the middle of the 18th century. One could not have planned the construction and subjection of the category “female” more systematically thorough than the complementary developments in the areas of science, culture, law and politics suggested, which all fell into place under the new ideology of “nature”. By contrast, the essential human subject was not defined by its body but by its mind, it was a rational coherent, autonomous, free agent (Hayles 1999: 85).

So, the general discourse of “nature” that was supposed to be the basis for the hard fought equality amongst humanity, in support of realizing the anthropocentric ideal of new concepts such as the universal human rights, precisely became the reason for the discrimination against and state of inequality of women due to their alleged “different” nature. The elevation of nature-based equality of human beings to become the universal norm, “naturalized” and therefore cemented the otherness of those who were deemed inequals by nature as “essential”.

William Blackstone, the English legal theorist of the mid-18th century, notoriously wrote that “[i]n marriage, wife and husband are legally one person, and that person is the husband.” Women just disappeared in all socially relevant ways after marriage [...] their very being [...] is suspended [...]” (Steinbach 2004: 267): they were virtually disowned, had no say over their children, were legally viewed as minors and had no say over their own bodies. The charge of rape during marriage was legally non-existent as it was considered a contradiction in terms.

A century after Blackstone's words, at the time Gustave Courbet accepted the remittance work of painting "The Origin of the World" nothing had fundamentally changed about these conditions. If women were considered embodied nature, and giving birth their destiny, men's task, according to the rationalistic nature-ideology, was to dominate nature, outward and inward nature, and hence, not least of all, women. Therefore, Courbet's flaunting of his model's private parts on canvas was not at all a "feminist act" nor an act of feminism in order to free the "femme covert", but, on the contrary, the perpetuation of the fantasy of female domination by men with the means of pornographic art, commissioned, composed, and painted by a man, sold to several other people, one of whom again commissioned yet another man in order to create a cover up of the motif, in order to better control who may and may not see "her".

Today, even though the worst violations of women's rights by local laws and regulations are to be found in non-Western states, there are gruesome exceptions, e.g. the human rights violations by law with regard to transgender people.



EXHIBITION *THE ORIGIN OF THE NEW WORLD*, ELENA DORFMAN ZÜRICH, 2018

Moreover, examples of everyday culture show that the origins of the nature-discourse are still viable in Western societies for example in the widespread devaluation of knowledge of any kind generated by women working as writers on the internet, as artists or academics. The abject misogyny displayed in the digital realm is particularly staggering. Here, violent insults and death-threats are offered as "criticism" of the work of female writers especially female writers of colour and trans women writers. Sexualized violent fantasies center around the alleged site of "female destiny", the reproductive organs: they threaten "sterilization", "cut[ting] out the womb", and "rape", in order "to make her stop writing"; suggestions to "go be a stripper or a whore or just hang yourself", culminate in the judgement that the female writer is "subhuman".¹

That the gendered identity of the creator of a work of art may play an important part in the public's willingness to accept their creation is suggested at the example of the replicas of Courbet's "The Origin of the World" in various media. At least statistically, creations by female artists seem to have been received more harshly and were cancelled more often, no matter the stance they took towards the original.² The continuity of constructing the essentialist "female destiny" by conflating woman and body in conjunction with the devaluation of "her" competency through violent fantasies that could very well be justified by the European Enlightenment's imperative of "nature domination" by the humanist subject is hard to miss.

1 Deutsche Welle, dw, The social media beauty cult, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PBs7RqPTrl> (01.10.2020)

2 Wiki, L'Origine du monde, the unofficial wiki list of works influenced by "The Origin of the World", online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%-27Origine_du_monde (01.10.2020)

Patriarchal care and violence are the two sides of the same coin even in late 20th and 21st century Western cultures. Courbet's 19th-century work perpetuates an image of women according to 18th-century gender-roles into its time and further into our present. The woman depicted is an aestheticized body, manufactured and exposed in order to be admired and assaulted. Considering the ongoing support for the construction of binary gender in order to secure power for the liberal humanist subject, it becomes less surprising, that the critical sardonic treatment of Courbet's subject sparked outrage:

Elena Dorfman's exhibition, *The Origin of the New World*, provided a setting that commented on and refuted the very logic of Courbet's "natural order". Overseeing the exhibition, my encounter with one visitor, who still seemed to buy into the ideology of binary gendered power-relations turned out to be so self-consciously performative, that I neither saw it coming nor thought it possible that I would be able to witness an extreme uncanny reaction like that—all at once to the artwork, to the absent artist, and to myself—in an exhibition that took place in the framework of a workshop on "The Uncanny Valley".

For said middle-aged, male, white, and, judging from his vernacular, Swiss visitor, i.e. a self-evident "human subject", the circumstance that on this December morning in 2018 in the exhibition room "Aktionsraum" at the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (Switzerland), contemporary photographer Dorfman's work was overseen by yet another woman, seemed to break the heteropatriarchal fantasy of women that he apparently and mistakenly expected to find on all levels of this exhibition, that featured a series of photographic replica, unfamiliarizing Courbet's painting. In a sense, the visitor made an honest mistake, considering that the 19th century artist's painting reaffirms the nature-ideology and arguably violently objectifies the female body as the epitome of "her" gendered identity—in popular culture comparable, perhaps, only to Alfred Hitchcock's fantasy in *Psycho* (1960)—and therefore must have been disappointed by Dorfman's replicas, which re-appropriate the representation of gendered bodies as markedly "unessential".

The visit was short, even if not a moment too short, and accompanied all the way by an outburst of his, provoked only by the highly intended wrecking of the visitor's gender-fantasy by Dorfman's work. I was the only other person in the room, so he made an, albeit stupid and ultimately unsuccessful, attempt at reinstalling the "due" gendered power-relations in this setting. On entering the room, he took some quick steps towards the photographs, looked at them, then yelled at me something unintelligible in Swiss-German while pacing agitatedly, aimlessly and too quickly through the room waving his arms uncontrolled. I asked him what he said in German and he screamed, "Did you do this?", looking at me and stretching out his arm like an arrow pointing in the direction of the photographs arranged on two adjoining walls of the room. I replied in the negative and that there was no need to scream at me. Then he yelled, angrily sneering at me: "You don't seem to like my macho-behaviour, do you?" And whether 'I thought that it all belonged to me', reminding me that "this is still a common room." Not quite sure what was going on, I told him that he cannot scream at me, and asked him whether he belonged to the university. He walked towards me, and menacingly said "What did you say? What did you say?" I walked towards him as well to show him I will not be intimidated, although my voice probably gave away that I did not feel terribly confident when I told him that he was 'welcome to watch the exhibition and then leave', but that he 'could not speak to me any longer.' I got my smartphone, and pretended to do something with it. He paused, made some jumpy steps towards the photographs for a moment and then, quickly and for once focussed, left the room. I was slowly but visibly following him out on the platform in front of the "Aktionsraum", pretending to be ready to make a call, while watching where he went. He nervously turned around a few times while making his way further through the building. I notified security immediately.

Why would looking at Dorfman's photographs aggravate the visitor? "Did you do that?" His fantasy-bubble burst in the moment he approached the photographs more closely and was confronted with the artificiality of the replicas of the exposed female genitalia in

a doll, marked by the visible staples. His moment of the uncanny valley, the shattering of a fantasy, even a betrayal turned the exhibition into a performance, whose clash of rules was anticipated in the laboratory setting of the exhibition, which challenged the visitor.

The uncanny is the realization of having been betrayed. Something that from afar looks familiar, like a person, changes upon closer inspection into something not quite “genuine” or “authentically” “human” according to the observers expectations.

This sense of having one’s expectations disappointed or even of being betrayed runs deeper than an optical illusion or a sensory disorientation such as the dismantling of the visual illusion about merely humanoid body parts that were formerly mistakenly perceived as “human”, guided by one’s expectations. Rather, this disappointment is a betrayal of the second order, a debunking of another illusion that goes with the first one — here, a betrayal of the human subject’s privileged expectation — that the Western cultural hierarchy of binary sexes and gendered power-relations is still in place, everywhere and self-evidently, namely the well-practiced visual and political hierarchy of the available female body and the (male) onlooker, as theorized in Laura Mulvey’s often cited “male gaze” and Michel Foucault’s “eye of power” that produces and establishes a “visual sovereignty” over the “genital body” in the first place (see Uparella 2018).

Courbet’s painting demonstrated this availability in abundance, curtailing the female body to his liking; in the absence of a head, arms, legs below the upper thighs any form of agency is denied. The naturalistic depiction of torso and vulva are exposed to the penetrating gaze of the viewer — violence unpierced by irony. The ideological context constitutes the enabling rationale: the complete conflation of the female body with the social identity and destiny of women due to the nature-discourse in the liberal humanist tradition.

The visitor’s disappointment with Dorfman’s photographs then, stems from their withdrawal from the nature-discourse. The photographs are not in line with traditional representations of the female body. The refusal to supply an ontological basis for the representation of gender builds up a resistance towards the viewer.

The Uncanny Valley model is linked to the nature-ideology since it features both, an implicit, undisclosed human subject and others; without them, however, the model would not generate the outcome that Mori depicted as robust and therefore as the basis for his claim that the UV-model could help in telling apart human beings from robots. Mori claimed the UV-model in robotics would help to define the human being. *The* human being that is envisioned by Mori to perceive the uncanny is, however, not without presuppositions. Considering its own unthinking assumptions about the human being, the UV-model rather generates the outcome it inserts in the first place, in other words: it does not merely *tell* who is a human being but it works on the perpetual *making* of the human being. Mori’s findings indicated a binary between a healthy human being and a human being with prostheses: Whereas the former *never* generates an uncanny reaction, the latter *always* does. It seems, the mechanism of the UV-model unthinkingly implies aspects of the life-world of the perceiving subject, to exclusively fit a “healthy human”: The model implies the experiences and social settings of a “healthy human” as default, which is constitutive for what is perceived as uncanny in the first place.

Considering the model’s intersubjective setting, it is highly unlikely that someone with a prostheses would react “uncannily” towards the unexpected encounter with a person who has a prostheses as well. Inferring from this, Mori’s UV-model, informed by European theorists from the 18th and 19th centuries, constructed a perceiving human subject that is presented as “universal” but that, much like the human subject in humanism, is defined by its tacit presuppositions. Insofar, the UV-model is a marker of perceived personal and socially institutionalized alterity, that renders distinctions *within* the species of human being — not in-between the human and the technological other — on the basis of personal familiarity. Therefore, it perpetuates the presuppositions of this setting, and renders them visible, rather than generating *new* findings. This is the rendering visible of extant discriminatory distinctions between the “human subject” and “non-human people” (Morton 2017).

The outrage over female agency was twofold: “Did you do this?” I did not, but Dorfman did: she took back the representation of women from the remnants of 19th century heteropatriarchy that still affect women’s lives today, and—intricately linked—she rejected the hegemony over the construction of gender that is utilized in order to exert power over those people who are irreducibly excluded from the category of human subject in liberal humanism. By re-appropriating Courbet’s artistic subject, female artist Elena Dorfman’s rendering destroyed the purely heteronormative perverse fantasy of the availability of the “embodied female” devoid of agency, a maimed “genital body” depicted in Courbet’s original, and turned it into a gender-fluid fair of, an—on closer inspection obviously—artificial figurative assembly, that makes light of body parts as spare parts with obvious seams and staples comprising an array of artificially coloured pubic weaves, as well as vulvas, breasts and penises in various shapes, sizes and skin-tones, which are mixed and matched like the sterile custom-fit industrial set-up on a website for the interior design of a car. The traditional view of binary normative gender categories that function as essential and therefore stable categories of identity is undermined. Thus, any power-relations depending on the stability and binary of sex and gender let alone gender-relations is presented by Dorfman as all, irreducibly constructed, illegitimate and doomed to fail. As a result, the preconditions for the Enlightenment idea of the “full human subject” are delegitimized.

Why would he refer to himself as “macho”? The then recent discussions in the wake of the semi-global “Me too” movement have obviously familiarized him at least superficially with the reality of issues around the objectification and abuse of as well as the discrimination against women, which he – also in line with the still mostly gendered roles of perpetrator and victim – has already lived up to in advance by acting as if he was personally charged with something (“You don’t seem to like my *macho*-behaviour, do you?”) and had to defend himself against all, the resistance of the photographs that announce the invalidity of the heteropatriarchal world view, against my refusal to act in accordance with my gendered “destiny” as a foreign woman, and against the rejection by the whole exhibition that he as the “human subject” is in power, including especially the power of artistic interpretation, of what can and cannot be exhibited: “Did you do that?” Curiously, precisely by acting out this “wrongfully accused male” perpetrator-fantasy in his performance, he enacted his abusive fantasy for real in the first place and directed it towards me. He enacted a backlash against his and like-minded people’s delusion that allegedly women have “taken over” (“You think this all belongs to you, right?”), which is reminiscent of the fear of losing those socio-economic and legal privileges most white men have been accustomed to for centuries at the expense of women’s and PoCs rights and freedoms.

This is nothing rare either, since the cycle of inadvertent actual “machismo” while making the case against (or rather whining about) being unfairly held in contempt for the sins of a few other (white) males who (tried to) abuse(d) their position of privilege “for real” is far spread.

The encounter with an uncanny being is described by Morton (2017: 134) as something that is in the same category with encountering an “abject”, “unclean” being. Typically, the aim is to get rid of it, through the exertion of violence. In patriarchal societies and cultures women’s bodies have traditionally been considered abject; the resulting violence against them was justified by the imperative of the domination of nature. “We make beings extermination-ready by designating them as uncanny” (ibid.). The intended specism of the Uncanny Valley (humans vs technological others) needs to dehumanize people, constructing them as non-human people in order to make a clearer distinction between the species (Morton 2017: 135) which benefits the doctrine of the hegemony of the autonomous liberal human subject. So, at the lowest point of the uncanny valley, we then find all kinds of “othered” people according to all structural discriminations we can think of: sexism and gendering, racism, anti-semitism and ableism.

“You don’t own this”: this final remarkable meaning points to the core of the matter. How can he, a Swiss man be subject to the rules of an-other that is neither male nor Swiss?

It is about ownership of place and hegemony of interpretation. He caught me red-handed while I tried to get away with something, namely changing, albeit indirectly, the order of how things are done. He would not let me “sneak by”.

The uncanny is first and foremost a judgment that there is something fundamentally “other” that tried to pass, to sneak by the detector which singles out the uncanny. The sense of uncanniness marks the detection of a betrayal which speaks to an intrinsic entitlement of that perceiving subject. Whether a perceiver is considered a human subject themselves or not, is the most important precondition for sensing uncanniness in another in the first place. The assurance of belonging, that resides as self-evident in the human subject, is insurance that they are considered the human norm and that the object that sparks uncanniness may be not. The Uncanny Valley unthinkingly became a normative model, in place to detect differences from the norm. Therefore, the UV merely measures violations of a society’s social norms, an effect that is exacerbated or diminished by the respective individual’s own experiences and horizons. Thus, the uncanny effect detects anything that is considered a deviation from the normative subject. “Disability” and “gender” are merely two of the triggers of the uncanny, if we consider Western culture as an indicator of who is fully considered a human being.

If an uncanny reaction is a reaction of extreme negative surprise and the feeling of betrayal towards a being that tried to “sneak by”, to “pass” as human (= healthy, human subject), and if further the reference for what is such a full human being are the traditions of a societies culture and history, it is no wonder that not all genders are included in the idea of “human”. A woman’s body, e.g. is still considered in some fields a deficient male body, as exemplified by the gender data-gap in medical research.

Against the backdrop of a heteropatriarchal attitude steeped in the ideology of a naturalized order, a “symbolic revulsion” (Ben-Ze’ev 2018: 207) towards everything that deviates from such norms, certainly against Dorfman’s photographs that invoke transsexual and intersex contexts and dismantle the normativity of binary gender, could activate an uncanny reaction in the respective human subject if representations of the fluidity and plurality of sex and gender as well as non-heteronormativity are perceived as “unnatural and non-human” (ibid.).

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