

Research Article

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The Uncanniness of the Ordinary: Aesthetic Implications of Stanley Cavell's Rethinking of *Das Unheimliche*

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Abstract: Through the many reinterpretations of Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919) within French Postmodernism, in recent decades, the uncanny has become a vague synonym for the methodology of deconstruction. The article aims to disambiguate the uncanny by reestablishing its characterizing nucleus and relocating it within the aesthetics through the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. The American philosopher claims that this feeling can be generated by drawing attention to the ordinary, which is so close and familiar to fade out of focus. Cavell and the German Philosopher Juliane Rebentisch following him show that artistic practices can reinforce this experience, as through displacements and dislocations, they deprive objects of daily use and ordinary matters of their familiarity and force us to look more closely at their material, sensorial, and phenomenological dimensions. In this way, Cavell and Rebentisch offer a path to reconstitute a stable conceptual framework for defining the uncanny, linking it to Freud's definition of something familiar appearing in an unfamiliar light. At the same time, they also propose a novelty by interpreting the uncanny not as inherently frightening and disturbing but as a compelling affective state that encourages a willingness to reappropriate and rediscover the ordinary.

Keywords: uncanny, Cavell, Freud, ordinary aesthetics, ethics of perception

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.)
Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1968, 500.

One is bound to admit that most people see the *closest things of all* very badly and very rarely pay heed to them ... [B]eing *unknowledgeable in the smallest and most everyday things* and failing to keep an eye on them—this it is that transforms the earth for so many into a vale of tears.
Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 2007, 303.

1 Introduction

In the last twenty years, the uncanny has become “one of the most supercharged words in our current critical vocabulary,”¹ with the effect of losing its characterizing nucleus and turning into “an insidious, all-pervasive, ‘passe-partout’ word to address virtually any topic.”² Following this evolution, the notion has been put to work

¹ Jay, *Cultural Semantics*, 157.

² Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 2.

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in a myriad of disciplines: from architecture (Vidler 1999) to film studies (Spadoni 2007), from visual arts (Kelley 2004) to cultural studies (Collins and Jervis 2008) and sociology (Gordon 2008), and from literature studies (Slethaug 1993) to queer (Palmer 2012) and postcolonial (Bhabha 1992) theory.

Through its association with postmodernist deconstruction, the uncanny began to indicate a general way of thinking, a strategy to create conceptual displacement, and question epistemic, semantic, or even political coherence.³ This expansion well beyond the boundaries of aesthetics has led to a loss of its conceptual core. Therefore, the article seeks to redefine the distinctive aspects of the uncanny and establish it as an aesthetic category, i.e., as the description and evaluation of a feeling called up by a specific sensorial experience with artistic or aesthetic objects. In doing so, the article suggests a partial return to Freud's connotation of the uncanny as the apparition of something well-known as unfamiliar. However, the Freudian perspective is integrated and partially modified through Stanley Cavell's reading. Cavell claims that the feeling, confronting us with the strangeness of what had hitherto been regarded as familiar and obvious, is characterized by a renewed attentiveness towards the ordinary rather than a reaction of shock and anguish. Following this interpretation, the article also aims at showing that the uncanny can be helpful to understand a "return of the real" through artistic practices not only in terms of repulsion, threat, and horror (Foster 2002) but also of commitment and curiosity.

Section 2 disambiguates the uncanny by tracing its genealogy, focusing on Freud's seminal text *Das Unheimliche* and some of its numerous – sometimes controversial or even betraying – reinterpretations within French Postmodernism. This operation is not intended to be a historical reconstruction of all the transformations of this prolific yet elusive category but a mapping of the processes of its conceptualization. Section 3 turns to Stanley Cavell's attempt to actualize the uncanny by distancing himself from the postmodern line of thought and getting back to some aspects of its Freudian definition. Highlighting the originality of Cavell's proposal, the article discusses both the ethical implications of drawing attention to the uncanniness of the ordinary and the role Cavell attributes to artistic works in sharpening the perception of habitual matters and common objects. This last point is elaborated on by the German Philosopher Juliane Rebentisch, whose proposal to read the uncanniness of the ordinary (*Unheimlichkeit des Gewöhnlichen*) as an aesthetic category will be examined in Section 4.

2 From the Freudian to the Postmodern Uncanny

The first philosophical references to the uncanny can be found already in Schelling, Nietzsche, and, above all, Heidegger. The Heideggerian position is particularly relevant to this article, as Heidegger is the first to discuss the connection between the uncanny and the everyday – a central topic for Stanley Cavell, even if he interprets it differently. Heidegger is not interested in the uncanny as a feeling but in the uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) as "the basic trait of the human essence, into which every other trait must always be drawn."⁴ A sense of homelessness and displacement is the ontological condition of being in the world, but "is covered over in everydayness"⁵; it is disguised and anaesthetized through the familiarity of our everyday life.

However, the seminal text which originates the discourse about the uncanny is Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* from 1919. From the very first lines, Freud explains that he is venturing into the field of aesthetics, pointing out that "aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of the feeling."⁶ It is worth dwelling on this preliminary clarification in order to discern the theoretical framework of Freud's argument and, consequently, gain a better understanding of the purpose of this

³ This approach can be clearly found in the first monograph devoted to the uncanny, in which Nicolas Royle for example claims: "another name for uncanny overflow might be deconstruction" (Royle, *The Uncanny*, 24).

⁴ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 161.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 256.

⁶ Freud, "The Uncanny," 219.

article, which seeks to (re)think the uncanny within the field of aesthetics. Freud designates aesthetics not only as the theory of the fine arts and our taste for them but also, in the direction of Baumgarten, as the science of *aesthesia* – the science of felt, affective experience, and sensible knowledge. This definition justifies that Freud's research also encompasses non-artistic occurrences of the feeling, yet literary works play a cardinal role as a privileged field for identifying the uncanny. Following Freud's argumentation, artistic works seem not only to reinforce, illuminate, and manifest the uncanny but also to shape it and establish the conditions for his thinking.

In his work *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière presents a similar argument regarding the Freudian notion of the unconscious. Discussing Freud's constant reliance on fictional works – ranging from the figure of Oedipus to his writings on Michelangelo, Leonardo, and his analyses of Hoffman's *The Sandman* and Jensen's *Gradiva* – Rancière claims that the Freudian theory can only be comprehended in relation to an aesthetic unconscious. According to Rancière, Freud's focus on artistic works does not primarily aim to support a psychoanalysis of art, thereby reducing art to “the sexual economy of the drives.”⁷ On the contrary, Freud recognizes that “creative writers are valuable allies”⁸ for psychoanalysis because they identify feelings and emotions ignored by positive science and fashion new modes of articulating the relations between sensory, affective experience, and thought. Drawing from Rancière's definition, it is possible referring to an “aesthetic uncanny,” as the uncanny is not restricted solely to artistic manifestations but fully emerges and delineates itself as an aesthetic category.

Continuing his argumentation in *Das Unheimliche*, Freud then admits that he “feels impelled”⁹ to delve into the specific qualities of the uncanny, because the aesthetics, being too concentrated on positive affective states such as the beautiful and the attractive, has neglected this feeling. The first necessary step is distinguishing it from the eerie and the horrifying. Even if the uncanny “is undoubtedly related to what is frightening,”¹⁰ it has its own conceptual core that the research has hitherto failed to identify. The first psychoanalytic work devoted to the subject by Ernst Jentsch is, according to Freud, unsatisfactory because it merely describes the uncanny as an affection due to “intellectual uncertainty” – for example about whether something is animate or inanimate – and therefore it “did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar.”¹¹ It is essential to keep in mind the critique against Jentsch because, as we will see, most of the postmodern interpretations insist on linking the feeling with an intellectual doubt, a cognitive insecurity creating a sense of ambiguity. However, Freud notices that intellectual uncertainty, even if bounded with it, neither constitutes the peculiarity of the uncanny nor is a sufficient condition for its manifestation.

To pin down the distinctive aspects of the feeling, Freud undertakes a detailed linguistic analysis, remarking on the impossibility of translating the German *unheimlich* into other languages. *Unheimlich* is the antonym of *heimlich*, which is not univocal, but “belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different.”¹² Its first and most obvious connotation relates to the root of the word from *Heim* (home). *Heimlich* indicates something familiar, comfortable, intimate, and hence also agreeable and friendly. At the same time, the word *heimlich* also means concealed, clandestine, and kept hidden.

Unheimlich should therefore negate both the meanings of *heimlich*: the familiarity as well as the concealment. However, the “un-” in the word *unheimlich* is not a classical linguistic negation but “the token of repression.”¹³ The repression neither follows the rules of the logic negation nor responds to the law of noncontradiction. When something is repressed, it is not neutralized but remains buried and yet still pulsing in the unconscious. Therefore, “it is perfectly possible that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time,”¹⁴ habitual and yet extraneous. Freud's most concise and effective definition explains the uncanny

⁷ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 49.

⁸ Freud, “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*,” 8.

⁹ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 219.

¹⁰ Ibid., 219.

¹¹ Ibid., 221.

¹² Ibid., 224.

¹³ Ibid., 245.

¹⁴ Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 8.

as “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression”¹⁵ but comes back manifesting itself.

After being overlooked for decades, Freud’s essay was rediscovered in the mid-1960s and, thanks to its intrinsic ambiguity and vagueness, affirmed itself as “a veritable goldmine for deconstructionists and post-structuralists.”¹⁶ Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, it experienced an intense phase of new conceptualization, sometimes even intentional distortion. The following analysis does not seek to survey all the authors involved in creating the “postmodern uncanny,”¹⁷ but to detect two main trajectories that brought the concept to the present, uncontrolled expansion.

The first line of interpretation turns to Freud’s essay in order to bring out the ambivalence between imagination and reality, fiction and truth. As Jacques Derrida observes, in the second part of *Das Unheimliche*, Freud distinguishes the uncanny as a feeling experienced in real life from the one aroused by fictional, mainly literary, productions. Freud admits that “fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny sensations than are possible in real life.”¹⁸ Fictive texts can deceive us “by promising to give us the sober truth and then after all overstepping it”¹⁹; they confuse readers by pretending to offer them a mimetic representation of reality, only to infiltrate fantastic elements.

Within this line of thought, the uncanny becomes paradigmatic for “the mystery of literary creation and the secret of this enviable power.”²⁰ It expresses “the undecidable ambivalence, ... the endless exchange between the fantastic and the real, the ‘symbolized’ and the ‘symbolizer.’”²¹ According to this postmodern viewpoint (see also: Weber 1973; Hertz 1985; Kofman 1991), the uncanny results not as a particular effect generated by specific literary works but as the essence of fiction. Fiction itself is ontologically ambivalent and, therefore, intrinsically uncanny as it doubles reality, creating another phantasmatic and elusive one; it forces the readers into a zone of liminality where a clear distinction between reality and imagination is effaced. Positioning the uncanny in the field of aesthetics, Freud aimed to emphasize the sensory and affective rather than intellectual nature of the phenomenon and thus delineate the features of the feeling also through its artistic manifestations. On the contrary, through this conceptual development, the uncanny progressively loses its traits as a well-defined feeling and becomes a general synonym of the ambivalence characterizing fictionality and imaginative productions.

Within the postmodern tradition, it is possible to track down a second way of interpreting the uncanny in an ethical-political sense. Twenty years after *The Double Session*, Derrida returns to Freud’s essay in *Specters of Marx*, connecting the subverting feeling of estrangement typical of the Freudian uncanny with Marxist alienation and Heideggerian homelessness. The most influential novelty of Derrida’s second face-to-face with Freud’s essay is using the uncanny as a deconstructive tool, as an instrument to haunt the familiar landscape and disturb “both the ethics and the politics.”²² A few years before *Specters of Marx*, Julia Kristeva also conducts an ethical-political reading of *Das Unheimliche*, claiming that Freud’s essay “teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves.”²³ Even if the feeling is aroused by the encounter with an external object, its actual cause is not a menace originating from the outside but rather the return of something repressed in the unconscious. The uncanny implies discovering a disturbing otherness in the heart of the subject, and can therefore give rise to an ethical and political attitude against xenophobia and nationalism.

Without wishing to judge the legitimacy of such different ways of rereading Freud’s text, this brief genealogy shows that both the association of the uncanny with the ambiguity of fiction and its ethical-political interpretation led to its conceptual explosion. As Mark Windsor observes, the consequence is that the uncanny

¹⁵ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241.

¹⁶ Griffero, “Weak Monstrosity,” 106.

¹⁷ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 8.

¹⁸ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 251.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁰ Cixous, “Fiction and its Phantoms,” 527.

²¹ Derrida, *Disseminations*, 268.

²² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 174.

²³ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 191.

no longer even refers to a specific feeling, but it “is rather used as an abstract critical tool which can, it seems, be applied to virtually anything.”²⁴ By leaving the sphere of aesthetics, the uncanny has been identified with the methodology of deconstruction and described as a general way of thinking, a strategy to create conceptual displacement, and to question epistemic, semantic, or even political coherence.

3 Uncanniness of the Ordinary and Surrealism of the Habitual: The Originality of Stanley Cavell’s Proposal

Once established its conceptual explosion and thus generalization, it is necessary to reconstitute a more distinct and precise core of the uncanny and move it back into the field of aesthetics. An interesting contribution in this direction is the notion of uncanniness of the ordinary developed by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. In a lecture delivered at Stanford University in 1986, Cavell uses Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* as a starting point to analyse the effects caused by receptivity towards everyday language, usually employed without being attentive to its expressiveness or sensitive to the meaning attributed to individual words.²⁵ Inspired by Wittgenstein’s grammatical investigation, Cavell claims that becoming aware of the mechanisms of “the so-called ordinariness or everydayness of language”²⁶ instead of considering it as an implicit a priori can be perturbing. Such an investigation overthrows habitual structures of experience, calls into question usual hierarchies, and displaces our attention. By forcing us to realize the strangeness of what has been hitherto considered familiar and trivial, it generates that peculiar feeling called uncanny.

In his reflections, Cavell also lingers on the process through which the ordinary has become so invisible and enigmatic to us that drawing attention to it appears disquieting. This aspect has been mostly ignored by postmodern literature, and Freud himself does not seem concerned with it. In his essay, Freud only detects the shift in the meaning of the word *Heimlich* from familiarity to concealment, but it does not investigate the reason behind it. On the contrary, Cavell examines how intimacy, becoming extreme closeness, turns into impenetrability and concealment. The everyday is obscured by its very familiarity and obviousness: “something is missed just because obvious.”²⁷ Insisting on this point on different occasions, Cavell points out that detective stories often play with the invisibility of objects and details that, surrounding our existence day-by-day, fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision. For example, in Edgard Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, considered a forerunner of the detective genre, “the narrative comes to turn on the fact that a purloined letter was hidden by being kept in plain view, as if a little too self-evident, a little too plain to notice.”²⁸

Another distinctive aspect of the everyday that hides it from our gaze is its iterative structure – an aspect that, as we will see later, Cavell particularly emphasizes when speaking of marriage. Rhythmic recurrences have a stabilizing and reassuring power but also blur the contours of what lies before our eyes until it becomes extraneous. For this reason, the everyday often appears as a nebulous background, and when a detail of this hazy setting emerges into view, it turns out to be unsettling. Cavell condenses this impression with the incisive formulation of “the surrealism of the habitual.”²⁹ When the amorphous everyday is brought into focus, it appears as bizarre as the distorted objects in a surrealist painting. Or, to take an example from movies, when a small detail suddenly invades the screen through a close-up, it seems disproportionate and strange.

In this way, Cavell shows that the *Unheimlich* negates both the spheres of what is familiar and what is hidden because it is a feeling called up when something arises from the opacity to which our extreme familiarity has confined it and demands attention. In his essay, Freud quotes two times Schelling’s famous

²⁴ Windsor, “What is the Uncanny?,” 54.

²⁵ See also: Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

²⁶ Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” 83.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁸ Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 164.

²⁹ Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” 83.

definition of the uncanny “as something which ought to have remained hidden but had come to light.”³⁰ In Cavell’s view, what is repressed and hence made invisible is the ordinary experience of things itself. By underlying this aspect, Cavell allows a return to the most characteristic core of the Freudian uncanny: its description as an affective state not due to a sense of ambiguity or undecidability but to the apparition of something well-known as strange and unfamiliar.

However, Cavell’s reading not only restores the original nucleus of the uncanny but also introduces a valuable novelty in opposition to the postmodern interpretation and partially against Freud’s own formulation. For Freud, the uncanny is a subregion of the frightening, and the postmodern tradition has also characterized it as profoundly shocking, even annihilating (Lacan 2014). On the contrary, Cavell connects it with a curiosity inviting to overcome the usual “avoidance of the ordinary”³¹ and to confront its texture. The emotional reaction caused by discovering the strangeness of the ordinary is not primarily horrific and alarming but rather an astonishment enacting new attention towards our relationship with language and reality.

In this regard, Cavell’s uncanniness of the ordinary exhibits several contact points with the phenomenological method. As pointed out by Emmanuel Alloa in his research on the topic (2017, 2018), Husserl already clarifies that the radical problem of phenomenology, and of philosophy itself, “is precisely the obviousness (*Selbstverständlichkeit*) in which the world is and is this world.”³² In order to grasp this obviousness that does not stand out, the phenomenological approach seeks to suspend the natural way of seeing the world and our pre-given understanding of it. As Merleau-Ponty explained, this suspension is conducted “not because we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things ... but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them.”³³

By bracketing habits of thought and experience, the phenomenological reduction tears off the veil of the ordinary and challenges us to rediscover the world “as if we were seeing it for the first time,” drawing attention to the strangeness of things in their facticity: “in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it.”³⁴ Merleau-Ponty describes this process as a wonder in the face of the world, but different authors also resort to the uncanny to illustrate this experience (Trigg 2011; Fuchs 2019; Griffero 2021). Defamiliarizing sedimented perception patterns and “undermining everyday trust in the world”³⁵ is at once disturbing and intriguing; it implies a change of perspective that is at first uncomfortable but discloses the obviousness that was lying hidden in plain sight.

According to such phenomenological readings as to Cavell, the uncanny represents an emotional state that can sharpen the sense experience and discernment of the ordinary. Cavell underlines that the difficulty in grasping what lies before our eyes is not a lack of knowledge but acknowledgment³⁶; therefore, the key to approaching and perceiving the everyday is an aesthetic understanding³⁷ rather than an epistemological one. In different texts (Cavell 1981; 1984), the American philosopher discusses the role played by aesthetic objects, particularly films, in redefining experience and developing the perceptive capacity to detach the richness and complexity of the ordinary. “The importance of film lies in its power to make what is important, what matters, emerge Attention to particulars is this specific attention to the invisible importance of things and moments, the covering over of importance in our ordinary life.”³⁸

Examining artistic media to shed light on everydayness, often perceived as something radically distinct from the aesthetic sphere, may seem peculiar, if not contradictory. However, by presenting this argument, Cavell underscores the inherent interconnectedness between everydayness and aesthetics. On the one hand,

³⁰ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241.

³¹ Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” 84.

³² Husserl, *Husseriana* 29:119, quoted in Alloa, *Resistance of the Sensible World*, 3.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 15.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Griffero, “Weak Monstrosity,” 121.

³⁶ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 238–67.

³⁷ See: Hagberg, *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*.

³⁸ Laugier, “What Matters,” 179.

he clarifies that aesthetics is not an autonomous, isolated domain of human experience but rather intimately intertwined with and nurtured by ordinary life. On the other hand, artistic works not only bring visibility to the overlooked facets of everyday existence but also reshape and renegotiate it. This interplay also shows how, according to Cavell, the arts and aesthetic experience contribute to philosophical understanding. As noted by David Rudrum regarding Cavell's frequent discussion of Shakespearean plays, these literary works are not used merely as functional examples or illustrations of philosophical concepts. Instead they become "an invitation to or occasion for philosophy in its own right."³⁹

A filmic redemption of the everyday is the central topic of Cavell's analysis of Hollywood's "comedies of remarriage" from the 1930s and 1940s. Marriage is the quintessential symbol for day-to-day repetition and what Cavell calls "the uneventful." While the eventless expresses an absence, the uneventful indicates "what is not out of the ordinary," and so conceived it is "an interpretation of the everyday, the common, the low, the near."⁴⁰ Such films find fascination with the frequently degraded uneventful demonstrating that "the rhythmic recurrences of ordinary diurnal life provide fun and interest enough to inspire life and a commitment to its continuation."⁴¹ They accomplish it not by romanticizing domestic life, not offering an unrealistic picture that transforms or negates the essence of everydayness but by showing its captivating and sometimes even funny "uncanniness." According to Cavell, the film is an exceptionally suited medium to this process because it not only represents the ordinary but implies it, hence disclosing it without idealizations. This often occurs through a displacement of everyday objects, enabling them to emerge from their usual unremarkability – a topic that will be further elaborated on in the next paragraph. For example, in a scene from *The Awful Truth* (1937), Jerry makes fun of himself in his too-big pajamas in front of his wife Lucy. Brought out by the filmic dispositive, this common piece of clothing takes the centre of the stage, appearing slightly grotesque but at the same time playful and vivid.

As Sandra Laugier underlines, Cavell's aesthetic reflections also have significant ethical implications. The "ordinary has been variously denied, undervalued, or neglected (not seen, not taken into account) in theoretical thought"⁴²; therefore, learning how to perceive and value it represents not only an aesthetic but also an ethical task. Cavell evokes the necessity of an "ethics of perception and sensitivity,"⁴³ not meant as a moralization of the gaze, aiming at teaching in a normative and prescriptive way where to direct our eyes. Far more, Cavell speaks of an ethical attitude, an exercise to focus on everyday gestures and particulars that we usually oversee or "look" without really "seeing." Paying attention to the ordinary can be uncanny not only because we discover its strangeness and richness we have been blind to, but also because it displays its vulnerability: "vulnerability defines ordinariness and the development of the concept of vulnerability provides new resources for a re-evaluation of the ordinary."⁴⁴ The ordinary is thus not something merely given – a stable, unchanging stage on which the significant and profound matters of our existence take place – but constitutes the fragile foundation in which our daily life is rooted and of which we need to take constant care. Therefore, this ethical approach "calls for a relocation and new hierarchy of importance,"⁴⁵ acknowledging the value of the ordinary.

4 Discovering the Uncanniness of Everyday Objects through Aesthetic Experience

The importance and actuality of Cavell's proposal for rethinking the uncanny have been underlined by the German philosopher Juliane Rebentisch. In particular, she analyses how artworks calling attention to

³⁹ Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, 56.

⁴⁰ Cavell, "The Ordinary as the Uneventful," 81.

⁴¹ Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 235.

⁴² Laugier, "What Matters," 173.

⁴³ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁴ Laugier, "Politics of Vulnerability," 212.

⁴⁵ Laugier, "What Matters," 173.

everyday objects can provoke an uncanny reaction. Her goals are to restore centrality to the sensorial and affective experience within the aesthetic debate and to show that the uncanny, as opposed to other categories such as abject, disgust, or shock, enables us to understand the emergence of the material and phenomenological dimension of the ordinary as compelling rather than menacing and shuddering.

Rebentisch's point of departure is an analysis of the challenges posed to the philosophy of art by the readymade – a banal everyday object, mostly discarded from our perceptual field, transformed into a work of art. Rebentisch begins by considering Arthur Danto's influential reflections on those questions. After having visited the first exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery of New York in 1964, Danto asked himself: "What makes the difference between a work of art and something not a work of art when there is no interesting perceptual difference between them?"⁴⁶ Danto states the difficulty of explaining the categorical difference between art and non-art by recourse to specific perceptible features, as it is impossible to distinguish Warhol's artwork from the standard Brillo soap boxes through sense perception. Therefore, he concludes that it is necessary "to turn from sense experience to thought,"⁴⁷ thus moving from the aesthetics, intended as the science of sense perception, to an ontology of art. According to Danto, the artworks have an ontological feature peculiar to them and lacking in ordinary objects: a metaphorical structure. An artwork always refers to an external meaning: Danto speaks of aboutness (the semantic capacity of "being about something") and embodied meanings (the meanings embodied in the material form of the artwork).

Rebentisch criticizes this explanatory model because it assumes a sharp contrast between sense experience and thought, leading to banishing the material and sensorial dimension from the artistic discourse. On the contrary, for Rebentisch, "the materiality of the artwork, which emerges in its sensorial visualization (*Anschaung*), is rather an aspect of the specific aesthetic appearance"⁴⁸ and contributes to producing its meanings. Every detail of the artwork arising from its materiality and the modes of its perception is significant. For example, Danto overlooks – or decides not to be significative – that the Brillo soup pads sold in supermarkets are made of cardboard, while Warhol's reproductions are made of silkscreened plywood (Herwitz 1993). Therefore, Warhol's works own different optical and haptic qualities, as they are smoother and shinier. Rebentisch also considers other famous readymades, such as Duchamp's porcelain urinal with the title *Fountain*. The distorted orientation of the urinal (turned by 90 degrees), the signature R. Mutt (one of the pseudonyms of the artist) on the lower left corner, and the presentation with an ironical title alter the familiar sensory experience with this everyday object.

Rebentisch shows that such artistic interventions and displacements, even if minimal, are crucial to modify the identity of use-objects, moving them into the sphere of aesthetic experience. While everyday items usually lay unnoticed under the attention threshold, these artistic dislocations drive the spectators to confront their materiality and engage in a different, more careful sensory experience with them. Once transformed into enigmatic objects of interpretation, "every element of their sensuous appearance, as well as every element of their staging, becomes potentially significant."⁴⁹ Therefore, by moving everyday items out of their opaque familiarity, such an aesthetic experience evokes the feeling of uncanny.

As Cavell, Rebentisch also describes the uncanny as disturbing and subverting, yet not destructive or annihilating. It is unsettling because it challenges habitual and seemingly self-evident mechanisms of experience, but thereby it fosters a new attentiveness towards the ordinary. Whereas such everyday objects are usually "too commonplace, too banal, too close for us to notice their specific configuration,"⁵⁰ through the aesthetic experience they regain volume and form, emerging in all their strange and fascinating thingness. The objects initially appear surreal in their vividness, but, just like the cinematic examples suggested by Cavell, they also offer themselves to perception with a provocative playfulness. For this reason, the viewer's

⁴⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁸ Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 131; my translation. All quotations of Rebentisch's contributions used in this article have been translated from the original German by the author since there is not yet a complete translation in English.

⁴⁹ Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 133.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 133.

emotional response oscillates between disturbance, as their familiar expectations have been overthrown, and interest in rediscovering those familiar items in a new light.

Another artistic example of uncanniness of the ordinary discussed by Rebentisch is the work of the American artist Dan Flavin. Flavin's installations with fluorescent light tubes create an immersive space of dazzling colour with radiant, lyrical qualities. Yet Rebentisch notices that, despite the overwhelming visual splendour of the light effects, Flavin also draws attention to the lamp as a material support. In addition to its fascinating optical quality, Flavin's work has a less evident but penetrating acoustic dimension. Neon lamps emit a steady electrical hum, which reminds us of their physical presence. Neon tubes, and more broadly, the physical medium generating light, typically slip in the background of daily perception, approximating invisibility. Such objects are present only in a technical and functional sense as "ready-to-hand," using the Heideggerian terminology to describe the forgetful and inattentive relationship with use-objects. Flavin instead let emerge the "abyssal presence of the light tubes,"⁵¹ intended as an aesthetic manifestation through which those items step out of the shadows in which they were confined to appear in their material and sensorial "objectuality." The matter-of-factness of the lamp still shines through the gaseous fluorescent glow: "the physical fact of the tube as object in place prevailed."⁵²

The becoming extraneous of the object is a typical trait of the uncanny within visual arts (Kelley 2004) and of its conceptualization by French Postmodernism. Jacques Lacan (2014), for example, explains the feeling as resulting from a loss of control by the subject over the space of vision. The objects of his gaze seem to look back at him, asserting their autonomy and posing a threat, until the distinction between intern/extern, subject/object shatters. While Rebentisch also advocates for an object-oriented theory of the uncanny, she departs significantly from this view. According to her, the uncanny does not necessarily correspond to a state of anxiety and the perception of objects developing an antagonistic life of their own in opposition to the human subject. As seen in the case of Duchamp and Flavin, an everyday object emerging in its materiality appears as enigmatic and reveals its irreducibility to its functional context and even a resistance against an instrumental logic. However, rather than being intimidating, this experience invites rediscovering this common item beyond its ostensible familiarity.

5 Conclusion

We can now summarize the main aspects of Cavell's proposal for rethinking the uncanny and its enrichment by Rebentisch, and finally consider the broader philosophical and aesthetic implications of these theories. First, these authors restore two features already central in Freud's essay and lost through its postmodern reinterpretations. Distancing themselves from the association of the uncanny with deconstruction, Cavell and Rebentisch demonstrate that the uncanny is not merely a method of critical analysis – and, therefore, it is not a tool used to render unstable a political, ethical, or epistemological system – but rather a specific feeling. Moreover, the essence of the uncanny lies not in ambivalence and undecidability, but in the appearance of something familiar in a new and unfamiliar light. Cavell and Rebentisch also innovate the Freudian perspective by characterizing the uncanny not as frightening and inherently threatening, but as a disturbing affective state caused by a renewed attentiveness to the obviousness of the everyday.

An immediate consequence of this approach towards the uncanny is the accent on the philosophical significance of the everyday. "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds."⁵³ Cavell frequently references this passage by Emerson⁵⁴ to highlight his own departure from philosophy's typical inclination to generality

⁵¹ Rebentisch, "Der Abgrund der Präsenz," 68.

⁵² Flavin, "Some Remarks...," 28.

⁵³ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 182.

⁵⁴ See also: Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*.

and essentialism. This approach risks neglecting the ordinary as something accidental and superficial, which at best can serve as an empirical starting point for philosophical inquiry, but not constitute its object. Instead of disregarding the uneventful ordinary as trivial and self-evident, Cavell explains his conception of philosophy as a practice that has “to reconnect conceptual knowledge of the world with self-knowledge and proximity”⁵⁵; it has to bring common words, feelings, and notions from a metaphysical use back to an everyday experience of them.

However, the everyday, with its repetitive monotony and immediate presence, proves elusive. Therefore, Cavell and Rebentisch turn to aesthetics in order to confront it. The aesthetic understanding they present should not be seen as a means to transcend or surpass the ordinary. Instead, it serves as a way to challenge habitual mechanisms of experience and enhance new ways of perceiving it. This perspective entails viewing aesthetic experience neither as a process of catharsis that dissolves the everyday into a frictionless and comfortable intimacy, nor as a quest for a traumatizing intensification of its perception. The notion of ordinary aesthetics proposed in this article suggests an alternative path between an everyday aesthetics that seeks to purify the ordinary of any disturbing aspects and an aesthetics that presents the encounter with the real as shocking and distressing.

The first tendency associates the ordinary solely with qualities such as comfort and safety, deriving aesthetic pleasure from them.⁵⁶ However, recognizing the uncanniness of the ordinary means acknowledging a certain resistance within the familiar everyday and the strangeness of its phenomenal, sensory facticity, hence highlighting its vulnerability rather than its stability and homeliness. Another trend in the actual aesthetic debate⁵⁷ is to depict the aesthetic experience as menacing or repulsive once it confronts us with the material texture of the everyday usually obliterated in the background of our attention. On the contrary, the uncanniness of the ordinary is not a violent shatter of the psyche of the recipients, a traumatic “return of the real.” Through the aesthetic experience, “the ordinary is able to return, not as a state of certainty, but as an ordinary that has to admit its own contingency and fragility, briefly: its exceptionality.”⁵⁸ The appearance of the ordinary as unfamiliar evokes a feeling of estrangement, that, instead of being shocking and paralyzing, elicits a proactive reaction, the will to look at it more closely and engage with its fragility: “the return of the ordinary as uncanny demands an active, committed attitude towards it.”⁵⁹

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⁵⁵ Laugier, “Emerson: Penser l’ordinaire,” 46; my translation.

⁵⁶ See for example: Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday.” Here Haapala states “Ordinary everyday objects lack the surprise element or freshness of the strange, nevertheless, they give us pleasure through a kind of comforting stability, through the feeling of being at home and taking pleasure in carrying out normal routines in a setting that is ‘safe’” (50). Or, always in the same article: “The aesthetics of everydayness is exactly in the ‘hiding’ of the extraordinary and disturbing, and feeling homey and in control” (52). However, in the field of everyday aesthetics, there are also authors giving an account of everyday life that acknowledges negative aesthetic qualities: Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*.

⁵⁷ See for example: Foster, *The Return of the Real*; Perniola, *Art and its shadow*.

⁵⁸ Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 134.

⁵⁹ Rebentisch, “Der Abgrund der Präsenz,” 67.

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