

## The uncanny mediality of the photographic GIF

Arild Fetveit

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Up on the mic repeating 2 words, over and over again ...  
These 2 words, a little bit behind the beat.  
I mean just enough 2 turn u on ...

So over and over, she said the words till he could take no more ...

2 words falling between the drops and the moans of his condition.  
Holding someone is truly believing there's joy in repetition.  
There's joy in repetition.  
There's joy in repetition.  
There's joy in repetition.  
There's joy in repetition.  
She said love me, love me, what she say?  
She say love me, love me. [1]

The store window mannequin, the graveyard statue, the roadside billboard can all come to life through the camera. Through photography, the desire of Pygmalion and the dream of Coppelius are fulfilled. [2]

One of the uncanny qualities of the mantis ... is that its defense against its predators is to 'play dead'. Rigid, immobile, wraithlike, the mantis's posture in life is to mime the inanimate ... even decapitated the praying mantis continues to ... perform a hideously robotic dance of life. 'Which is to say', Caillois writes, 'that in the absence of all centers of representation and of voluntary action, it can walk, regain its balance, have coitus, lay eggs, build a cocoon, and, what is most astonishing, in the face of danger can fall into a fake, cadaverous immobility. I am expressing in this indirect manner what language can scarcely picture, or reason assimilate, namely, that dead, the mantis can simulate death. [3]

Could one reason why the photographic GIF feels so apt in the commemoration of someone's life – after they have passed from the living to the dead – be that this medium itself, on some level, may operate as a *mise en abyme* for this very passage? Certainly, the photographic GIF may symbolically resurrect with triumphant vigour someone who has just passed away. This was demonstrated when Roger Nelson, a.k.a. Prince, was vibrantly brought to life in a number of GIFs reverberating across social media following his death in April 2016.



Fig. 1: GIF Prince.

I was especially struck by a radiant GIF in which Prince oozes flirtatious vitality, combining endearing innocence with a readiness for depravity. He blinks, nods upwards as he throws the camera a seductive smile that invites a response. The looped six-second clip effectively conveys his vibrant energies. They promise 'joy in repetition' and uninhibited freedom – spiked with the cocky arrogance of someone bent on pleasure, yet hard to please.

I enjoyed the unremitting repetitions of the GIF, which rendered Prince miraculously alive. But gradually I came to sense a whiff of something less

pleasant. The joy in seeing his lively gestures repeated, and in scrutinising their vibrancy, gave way to a feeling that the repetitions threatened to deplete his spontaneity. His liveliness increasingly became perceivable as a product of meticulously-honed Casanova skills. Well-rehearsed moves would still involve variation, of course, not unlike those in a musical performance where artists play the same songs and the same licks, yet endow the repetitions with life.

A more deadening sense of repetition, however, appeared to emanate from the operation of the medium itself. The relentless exactitude of the algorithmic repetitions, little by little, seemed to deplete the artist's very agency, to take on the position of a puppet master threatening to metamorphose the lively Prince into a mere automaton. It invited uncertainty as to whether his gestural life originated from within, or instead from external forces animating him. A considerably darker aspect of the medial affordances in operation seemed to materialise. The photographic GIF, it appears, is effective in providing a passage, not merely from the dead towards the living, but as much, from the living towards the dead.

It has long been known that repetition without variation may be deadening. This was dramatized to powerful effect in the Greek myth of Sisyphus, once the king of what became Corinth. Punished by vengeful gods for his unending trickery, Sisyphus ended up forever having to roll an immense boulder up a hill in the underworld, only to watch it roll back down again each time. Nietzsche radicalises the exactitude of the Sisyphean repetition and thereby its deadening effect when he asks:

What, if some day or night a demon were to ... say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence ...' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? [4]

Nietzsche rightly assumes that very few of us would willingly submit to such a deadening repetition according to which we should forever re-live every moment in our lives with exactitude. Even if life is mired with repetition, life itself, the very idea of liveliness, resides even more in its opposite – in the play of difference. Exact repetition therefore threatens to suppress, even to eradicate, the spark of life. Deleuze points out how Nietzsche's eternal return also effects a dissolution of the self.[5] The repetition eradicates not only agency, but exerts pressure on the agent, the self, whose actions become futile

when they can no longer add anything to the world beyond another repetition. As any effort is undermined, the self is stuck, still alive – yet not fully.

When watching the GIF with the flirtatious Prince, especially in the wake of his death, spectators were likely to appreciate its power to recall his liveliness. The deadening effect of the repetition, however, may be less apparent to many. It may announce itself through a barely noticeable unease accompanying the viewer's joy, a bit like the bitter edge integral to a gin and tonic. It may be subtle or almost absent for some, poignant for others, even disturbing for the sensitive. This bitter edge is the uncanny.[6]

Since there is not only joy in repetition, but also deadening potentiality, it should not surprise us that the unmitigated repetitions of the GIF may invite the uncanny. However, animated GIFs hardly allow for uncanny medi-ality. The propensity for such mediality seems confined to GIFs involving photographic material, moving as well as still, which is why we must examine how photographic mediality may support uncanniness in order to understand the GIF's uncanny potential.[7]

The GIF featuring Prince exemplifies one way in which uncanny med-iality may operate. An entirely different model for how the uncanny med-iality of the GIF may operate is instantiated by the cinemagraph. Two ancillary examples, featuring a vengeful bottle of Champagne and Charlie Chaplin eating respectively, help elucidate factors that are decisive for this operation.

Before getting to these examples, I will probe the potential uncanniness of photographic mediality by means of the history of its theorising. But first the uncanny itself must be examined as to its resonance with the medial logic of the GIF.

## The uncanny

Much like the sublime, with which it has important commonalities, the uncanny is a feeling we experience. Among the numerous conceptions of the phenomenon, the one offered by Ernst Jentsch in 1906 may still be the most pertinent:

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact

be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness. [8]

Positioned obscurely at the back of our consciousness, the uncanny feeling may thrive and fester, safe from the scrutiny we would grant something calling for immediate attention, like should we come to doubt whether the tree trunk we just have sat down on may be a snake. When we commemorate a great artist's peak moments in GIFs, the phenomenon at hand may safely thrive at the back of our consciousness, receiving no more attention than we grant the aforementioned bitter edge of our gin and tonics.

Uncanny feelings have many sources. According to Jentsch, they may arise from seeing epileptic seizures, and from automatons and wax figures that take on a realism that invites us to confuse them with living beings. He therefore advises moderation in art as to 'the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings', [9] advice the Japanese robotics researcher Masahiro Mori in 1970 rearticulated into operational principles for an *uncanny valley* applicable for CGI and animation. Our affinity towards a robot increases steadily the more it comes to resemble humans, until it takes a dip into an 'uncanny valley' while it reaches what Mori estimates to be a 75-95% resemblance. [10] Consistent with Jentsch's conception, Mori's model also classifies an ill person as prone to evoke uncanny feelings, a human corpse even more so, and a zombie, were we to see a member of the walking dead coming toward us, very strongly so.

Sigmund Freud approvingly lists many of Jentsch's examples, which he with curious relevance for GIFs says may 'excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation'. [11] One of the ways in which Freud adds to Jentsch's conception of the uncanny, beyond elaborating on it, [12] is by drawing on Otto Rank's explorations of the double, involving mirrors, shadows, guardian spirits, and more. Freud writes:

the 'double' was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death', as Rank says; and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body ... The same desire led the ancient Egyptians to the art of making images of the dead in some lasting materials ... But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. [13]

With curious prescience, Freud's summary of Rank's ideas anticipates major theoretical contributions to the relation between photography and death.

Freud goes on to unfold the uncanny potential in the double by introducing us to one form the 'uncanny harbinger of death' may take.

In Ewers' *Der Student von Prag*, which furnishes the starting-point of Rank's study on the 'double', the hero has promised his beloved not to kill his antagonist in a duel. But on his way to the duelling-ground he meets his 'double', who has already killed his rival. [14]

Agency is rendered precarious, and so is the boundary between self and other. Freud observes here a dissolution of the self, 'a regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons'. [15] He also connects the uncanny to our proclivity to regress to animistic conceptions of the universe in which magical powers are attributed to things and persons. Children often share the belief that most things surrounding us have inner life, but as we grow up, we abandon this notion. On a cultural level, Enlightenment thinking has largely laid such beliefs to waste. However, according to Freud 'we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon a confirmation'. [16] Thus, we readily return to animistic sentiments we have purportedly overcome, we play with them, and at times they play with us, even haunt us. [17]

## The ontology of photography

The uncanny also haunts the history of photography. An early example can be found in the following observations by the photographer Karl Dauthendey.

In the early days, people did not dare ... to look for very long at the first pictures produced. They were startled by the vividness of the figures and believed that the tiny little faces of the personages who appeared on the image could see them too. That is how uncanny an effect the unaccustomed vividness and lifelikeness of the first daguerreotype images exerted on everyone. [18]

The medium of photography announces itself from 1839 and onwards, according to Dauthendey, in the form of daguerreotypes so vivid that those portrayed seem able to look back at their beholder. [19]

André Bazin follows Rank in anchoring the creation of images in an Egyptian attempt to overcome death through preserving the body. Bazin sees this

'mummy complex' as inspiring the creation of a means by which we can 'preserve, artificially ... bodily appearance ... snatch it from the flow of time', because, as he notes, 'death is but the victory of time'. [20] Embalming the body, making its sculpture, painting its portrait and photographing it, according to Bazin, all partake in preserving us from a 'second spiritual death'. [21]

Bazin goes on to praise the unique power of this new image to make the photographed model *present* to spectators:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. [22]

When Bazin writes that the photographic image is 'the object itself', he comes close to reporting what early spectators according to Dauthendey felt as they were 'startled by the vividness of the figures and believed that the tiny little faces ... could see them too'. Thus, both Dauthendey and Bazin come to relay the experience of looking at a photographic portrait as eerily similar to looking into the face of a real person. Bazin draws inspiration from Sartre's phenomenology when he indicates how, for spectators, the photographic medium on some level withdraws from our experience and allows us to perceive the person photographed rather than their picture. [23] Sartre suggests that such a process involves a faint animation when he notes that, 'if that photo appears to me as the photo "of Pierre", if, in some way, I see Pierre behind it, it is necessary that the piece of card [the photograph] is animated with some help from me'. [24] By suggesting that the photographic medium somehow withdraws from the experience, so as to weaken the boundary between the animate model and the inanimate image, Bazin and Sartre implicitly point to uncanny potentials along similar lines as relayed by Dauthendey. What emerges is a series of accounts in which spectators look at photographic portraits and see people rather than portraits of people.

We have seen that Bazin construes the photographic image as a defence against death. Ironically, the power with which the image renders its photographed models *as if alive*, curiously opens towards what it was aimed to defend against: death, by means of creating uncertainty as to the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. If Bazin was aware of these less-than-rational aspects of our engagement with photography, Barthes may have been even more so.

## Deanimation and animation

Barthes' *Camera Lucida* offers the most compelling articulation of connections between photography and death to this day, an account that draws much of its power from the uncanny mediality it explores already at its opening:[25]

One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.' [26]

Barthes is not only 'looking at eyes' instead of a photograph of eyes. These eyes yield a further connection to the mythical older brother they have beheld. If Barthes is sensitive to the animating potentials in having the medium disappear and give way to the person portrayed, he is also sensitive to the ways in which a form of deanimation is integral to the photographic process.[27]

As early photographs required several minutes of exposure time, knees, backs, necks, and heads were stabilised by means of supportive devices. Such devices, used well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, appear as if internalised in Barthes' descriptions of his own stilling while being photographed. 'Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes', he notes:

I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image ... I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it. [28]

A pressure is exerted on Barthes, making him transform himself into an image before the moment when the camera shoots him. It paradoxically mortifies him in its attempt to preserve him from what Bazin calls a 'second spiritual death'. Without explicitly thematising the uncanny, Barthes proves to be acutely aware of its manifestations. He notes: 'the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity'.[29] Thus, Barthes faces his double. And again, echoing *The Imaginary* by Sartre, to which he dedicated his book, Barthes is looking at 'himself' rather than 'a picture of himself'. Thereby he invokes the uncanny much like Bazin and Dauthendey. Barthes moves further along such a trajectory to suggest that the medial logic of photography may somehow appear to awaken the dead:



in the case of photographing corpses ... if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive. [30]

If photography freezes, immobilises, and deanimates a living face being photographed, a process we often assist in by transforming ourselves in advance into an image, as Barthes notes, we may envision a reversal in which our gaze, aided by our imagination, compensates for this by re-animation of the face again somehow, so when we look at the photograph, we see someone alive. The photographed corpse comes to partake in this, too, by also having life ascribed to it.



Fig. 2: Daughter with her parents.

In the unusually uncanny example above, the dead daughter in the middle looks more sparkingly alive than her ghostly-looking parents. While the corpse was perfectly stilled when the photograph was taken, her living parents were not.

The transformative power of photography, its ability to turn 'living beings into things, things into living beings', in the words of Susan Sontag, has long been known.[31] The surrealists were deeply fascinated with the photographic work of Atget, especially his mannequins, which he made seem eerily alive.[32]

## Photographic GIFs

I started this exploration by suggesting that the medial logic of the photographic GIF could somehow facilitate a passage from the dead to the living, as well as from the living to the dead, a medial capability which shows up in the by now well-explored GIF featuring Prince. It has now become clear that photographic images in and of themselves are also capable of uncanny transformations that may instigate doubt as to whether an apparently living being is inanimate, or a lifeless object animate. Thus, we might assume that the uncanniness permeating photographic history may also support the uncanny mediality of photographic GIFs in various ways.

Aspects reminiscent of the deanimation and animation processes effecting uncanniness in photographs are also at work in the GIF featuring Prince. The low frame-rate of the GIF impedes the organic flow of movement and effects a recurring stalling of the image, a stuttering flow in which deanimation and animation are pitted against each other in a way that comes to mechanise human movement.[33]

Photographic affordances which by themselves are not particularly uncanny also contribute to the uncanniness of this GIF. When repetitions induce uncanniness, it is largely, as we have seen, by means of impeding liveliness. The camera image rendering Prince's lively expressivity is crucial for establishing such a liveliness, and thereby for setting up the possibility for its suppression. A non-photographic animated rendering of Prince could not grant us access to his liveliness with the compelling force of the camera image.

Photographic mediality affects the temporality of this GIF in yet another way. Barthes associates the mediality of the still photograph with the past. It

is a conduit to something '*that has-been*'. [34] The moving image, however, invites us not so much into a past as into a present unfolding of the now. But the GIF featuring Prince does not align itself fully with either of these temporalities. It seems curiously positioned in-between. The elided moment repeated draws us into its present tense only to dispatch us from the forward flow each time the loop restarts. At the same time, the movement precludes a full alignment with a photographic temporality. Thus, we may find ourselves in what could be called a temporality of an enlivened, prolonged photographic moment, which, even if the image is not stilled, therefore does not escape being endowed with a sense that '*this-has-been*', which Barthes identifies as the essence of photography. This partial alignment with photographic temporality allows the GIF to be endowed with an uncanniness caused by the second 'punctum' in *Camera Lucida*.

In contrast to the first 'punctum', which Barthes characterised as an accident that 'pricks' him, [35] a detail that 'attracts or distresses' [36] (a belt, strapped pumps, dirty nails are among his examples), the second 'punctum' is fundamentally uncanny. Its uncanniness is based in the temporal structure of the photograph's mediality, dramatically exemplified in the photograph of the young Lewis Payne awaiting his death penalty for the attempted assassination of President Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State, W. H. Seward. Barthes observes an uncanny double temporality that curiously makes Payne hover between life and death: '*He is dead and he is going to die ...*' [37] Barthes adds:

I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*. I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake ... I shudder ... *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. [38]

When looking at the less dramatic GIF featuring Prince we can also confirm that, as in the case of Payne, *he is dead* and *he is going to die*. Barthes takes one important step further, however, by noting:

In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder ... *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. [39]

The loss of the subject photographed is not merely taking place at life's end. Rather, it is a perpetual aspect of being in time, to which every photograph testifies by means of its uncanny double temporality. Krauss generalises Barthes' point by proposing that 'to the calm statement "this has been" must

be added another, more lacerating report, reading, “this is going to die”. [40] As much as a remembrance of life and vibrancy, therefore, photography proper, as well as the photographic media that partake of photography’s temporality, come to operate as memento mori in which life and death are uncannily intertwined, so as to make the ‘assurance of immortality’ also become ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’, in the words of Freud.

While a number of photographic GIFs based on looped excerpts from films and other moving image materials are prone to evoke uncanny feelings much as the Prince GIF is liable to, there are also a number of photographic GIFs that only display limited potentials for uncanny mediality. Often this may be because, for various reasons, they do not establish much liveliness in a main character for the algorithmic repetition to suppress.



Fig. 3: Backfired Champagne Throw.

Many GIFs epitomise basic elements of the human condition in ways that allow reflection and humorous musings on how we should live our lives and how we should not. Here a young man, dressed in a tuxedo, throws a bottle of champagne against a concrete surface. The bottle rebounds with the energy from its cork popping and comes back with curious precision to hit him in the groin. As Tianna Loose observes:

The suit, champagne, setting, sex and age all go towards the powerful character who thinks he can do whatever he pleases; we’re waiting for an explosive destruction of the bottle as he throws it against the concrete. It shoots back, and we are satisfied as a power figure has his destruction thrown right back at him, striking his masculinity and humbling his narcissism. [41]

This GIF allegorises human hubris and its serendipitous correction. If jackass behaviour aims to boost a form of masculinity, the bottle's focused assault on his private parts seems to epitomise a glimpse of divine justice Dante Alighieri might have appreciated. This GIF also invites musings on how human actions may backfire. It may remind us of our impotency on some level, our inability to achieve the outcomes we aim for. This issue was a key concern for the Greek tragedy, which dramatised the problems of human actions backfiring to its greatest effect in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Thematically, then, the GIF hints at uncanny themes by its thwarting of human potency, as well as through the uncanny notion that the champagne bottle has decided to bring justice to the man. Uncanny mediality, however, is hardly in play here, which is consistent with the fact that faint liveliness is established in this character whose face we never see. However, there are also GIFs in which uncanny mediality is considerably more pronounced and immediate than that featuring Prince. A case in point is this GIF featuring the fashion model Emily Ratajkowski fingering her ripped jeans.



Fig. 4: Emily Ratajkowski fingering ripped jeans.

The mediality in play here is radically different from the one congealed by the looped moving images we have looked at so far, and its uncanniness is considerably more pronounced. This kind of GIF, which was labelled a 'cinemagraph' by Kevin Burg and Jamie Beck, who sought to develop a sophisticated GIF suitable for marketing, seeks to enliven a photographic moment with an element of movement in an otherwise still image. The looping point

is hidden so as to conjure a moment lingering on forever, a 'perpetual present', as Bering-Porter calls it,[42] a frozen space-time paradoxically moving, a moment granted life yet spared 'the victory of time' which Bazin's Egyptians saw as the price paid for life.[43] Its mediality is premised upon having the still image pitted against the moving image so as to instantiate an impossible image, a medial oxymoron that invites a lingering conflict in our sensorium between the way we see moving images and the way we see photographs.[44] The result is transfixing.[45]

In this particular GIF, the conflict between stillness and movement is intensified by making the human body the arena where these conflicting medialities are pitted against each other, so as to leave one part of the model's body moving while the other parts are stilled. Seeing her lower left arm move invites viewers to expect that other parts of her body will move, too. But when we look for signs of movement, signs of life, in other body parts, the alarming conclusion is that there are none. Conversely, when attempting to normalise this stillness, as akin to the stillness of a photograph, her moving arm becomes eerie, uncannily enticing the viewer to animate her still image, to make her come more alive than photographs allow. Vexed in irreconcilable medialities – she cannot move, yet she moves – we keep looking, struggling to harmonise the tensions.[46]

The medial uncanniness effected is further reinforced by the ways in which uncanniness is thematised. This involves an aspect of the model's detached arm, the obsessive-compulsive fingering of her ripped jeans, and her blasé attitude. 'Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist ... feet which dance by themselves ... all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them', writes Freud, 'especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition.'[47] He adds that 'this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to the castration complex'. Earlier in his essay, Freud sought to rebut Jentsch's conception of the uncanny by claiming that the most powerful uncanniness is not grounded in doubt as to whether something is animate, but in the castration complex. However, Freud fails to realise that the severing of body parts, the male member included, is consistent with the tenor of Jentsch's conception in important ways. We have already seen how disruption of agency and potency are key elements that may bring the liveliness of a person in doubt. Hélène Cixous astutely forges such a connection when she compares the effect of castration to that of being buried alive, offering for a man, she notes, 'a bit too much death in life; a bit too much life in death'.[48] As we have seen,

Freud also observes that dismembered limbs and severed heads are most uncanny when they 'prove capable of independent activity'. Both urban legends and horror films have taken this principle to heart. Roger Caillois finds yet another compelling connection between decapitation and doubt about whether something is animate in the case of the praying mantis, accounted for in the opening of this article, which, when dead by decapitation is actually alive enough to share life by copulating or laying eggs. Decapitated, it can also simulate death by playing dead. Thus, it should be clear by now that the case of severed body parts, rather than proving Jentsch's conception to be flawed, represents a stage on which its powers can be dramatised to their most horrific effect. When the severing of body parts is not merely horrifying, but also uncanny, it is precisely because it induces 'doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate', in the words of Jentsch. While decapitation brings such horrors to the front of our attention, the detached lower arm, the fingers of which obsessively scratch at the ripped jeans, however, does little more than hint at such horrors.

The model's obsessive-compulsive fingering may testify to a potentiality for 'joy in repetition', in the words of Prince, but joy now is impeded by boredom. She is stuck in an empty time confluent with her blasé expression. Simmel notes that 'the blasé attitude deadens the particularity and specific charms of things and reduces them to shadows of monetary wealth'.<sup>[49]</sup> This GIF sells jeans, and the fashion model's blasé attitude echoes the deadened look of the mannequin meant to guide the attention to the clothes on display.<sup>[50]</sup> The directness of the model's blasé gaze, however, also carries a dare to the observer, perhaps to enter the picture and help her with the itch she seems unable to satisfactorily scratch. This implicit invitation is supported by the fingering of the jeans, but is also undermined by the disturbingly mechanical character of the repetition, which depletes her agency and effects tensions between the animate and the inanimate, as well as between humans and machines. These thematic aspects resonate with the uncanny mediality in question and contribute to an unusually uncanny GIF.

However, it is also possible to see her disjointed appearance as grotesque, even ridiculous. Curiously, mechanisation of the human body may not merely elicit uncanny feelings. It also carries potentials for inviting laughter, whereby the uncanniness may be subdued. In his book on the comedy, Henri Bergson claims that '*[t]he attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine*'.<sup>[51]</sup> When

he goes on to claim that, '*[a]ny arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*', it is all the more apparent how intimately connected sources of the uncanny and of the comedy can be.[52] Charlie Chaplin's hilarious colliding of the living body with the machine in *Modern Times* (1936) epitomises Bergson's recipe for comedy. But interestingly, the comedy appears subdued when remediated in this GIF.



Fig. 5: Chaplin having a modern meal.

Perhaps this is because the comic effect in the original film scene rests on balancing Chaplin's liveliness against the mechanisation forced on his body by the machine. The uncanny mediality of the GIF, however, unsettles this balance. It suppresses Chaplin's liveliness by means of the unremitting repetitions of the GIF and the jerky motion of a radically low frame rate. Comedy gives way to uncanniness, but as much to plain cruelty as the body's force to stand up to the machine is depleted.[53]

If movements of the human body that remind us of a machine may inspire comic as much as uncanny feelings, following Jentsch, we might assume that doubt as to what causes the machinic impression may be an important factor in determining what feelings ensue. Bergson comes close to confirming this notion when he notes that 'the more natural the explanation of the cause, the more comic is the effect'.[54] The opposite may then also be the case: the more unnatural, disturbing, and unfathomable the cause, the less



comic the effect, and the more likely it is that the uncanny will prevail. A well-rehearsed balancing act between the two may be found in the splatter film, where humour is effectively used to soften the horror of uncanny effects.

Thus, the GIF is not merely interesting as a scene on which photographic mediality may be displayed, tested, and probed. It is also a scene where uncanny mediality may effect transformations that tip their hats to Halloween's softening of the boundary between the living and the dead, and where comic effects may soften its horrors.

By pitting movement against stillness, machine against body, technology against human – the GIF appears well-poised to allegorise the fundamentally fraught relation we have with technology – our desires to embrace it, as well as our fears of the ways in which it reduces us to props in its own machinations. The GIF is also an arena in which the powers of uncanny mediality lend potent tools to image makers.

'Every new technology has a utopian dimension that imagines a future radically transformed by the implications of the device or the practice', according to Gunning.[55] While the GIF cannot be expected to transform our world on the scale that cinema has, its potentials are far from exhausted – also when it comes to its abilities for effecting uncanny mediality.

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## Author

Arild Fetveit is an independent scholar. He has published in the fields of reception studies, convergence, medium-specific noise, music video, and the digitisation of film and photography. He co-edited *Indefinite Visions: Cinema*

*and the Attractions of Uncertainty* (University of Edinburgh Press, 2017) with Martine Beugnet and Allan Cameron. His writing has appeared, among other places, in *Screen, Media, Culture and Society*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *NECSUS*.

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## Notes

- [1] Prince 1990.
- [2] Savedoff 2000, p. 45.
- [3] Krauss 1994, p. 171.
- [4] Nietzsche 1974, p. 341.
- [5] Deleuze 1995, p. 11.
- [6] The term creepy seems to be used often in online comments on GIFs when people testify to uncanny feelings.
- [7] Existing research literature on GIFs is of limited help on this question. It has largely addressed the history of the format (Eppink 2014, Finley 2017) and its potentials for sharing relatable feelings and stances in social communication (Tolins & Samermit 2016, Miltner & Highfield 2017), although the pondering of formats can also be found (Poulaki 2015, Chiarini 2016) as well as broader analysis of the cultural significance of the format (Dall'Asta 2016). David Bering-Porter (2014) actually discusses the uncanny in a comparison between Martin Arnold's experimental films and GIFs, but curiously reserves his observations on uncanniness for the films alone. Ren Adams (2014) brushes upon uncanny mediality when addressing 'a haunting sense of repetition and reappearance' in a research paper on GIFs and other loops, but offers but a faint exploration of the uncanny.
- [8] Jentsch 1995, p. 8.
- [9] Jentsch 1995, p. 10.

- [10] Mori 2012.
- [11] Freud 1971, p. 226.
- [12] Although Freud expresses misgivings about Jentsch's conception of the uncanny, he elaborates on it to a much greater extent than he is willing to admit. Engaged in playful attempts to psycho-analyse Freud, or buried beneath a stifling veneration for his authority, scholars have for the most part failed to address this.
- [13] Freud 1971, p. 235.
- [14] Ibid., p. 236, note 1.
- [15] Ibid., p. 236.
- [16] Ibid., p. 247.
- [17] See Jentsch 1995, p. 13.
- [18] Dauthendey cited in Benjamin 2015, p. 69. When Esther Leslie's new translation employs the term 'uncanny', even if 'unheimlich' is not used in the German original, it is in order to convey the idea expressed.
- [19] From the 1860s the ghostly double exposures of spirit photography mined another potential for uncanniness in photographic mediality. See Gunning 1995.
- [20] Bazin 2005, p. 9.
- [21] Ibid., p. 10.
- [22] Ibid., p. 14.
- [23] Dudley Andrew accounts well for how Sartre inspired Bazin (2010, p. 12).
- [24] Sartre 2004, p. 19.
- [25] Beyond noting the uncanniness of Barthes' opening, Rosalind Krauss adroitly characterises his book as an elaboration of 'the photographic effects of the uncanny', although he does not mention the term. Krauss 1985, p. 64.
- [26] Barthes 1982, p. 3.
- [27] When discussing a photograph by Kertész, Barthes describes such a disappearance in the following way: 'I perceive the referent (here, the photograph really transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign, but the thing itself?)', *ibid.*, p. 45.
- [28] Ibid., pp. 10-11. Barthes develops this by noting: 'I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (if only for commercial reasons) this death in which his gesture will embalm me.' Ibid., p. 14.
- [29] Ibid., p. 12.
- [30] Ibid., pp. 78-79.
- [31] Sontag 2005, p. 75.
- [32] For further exploration of this topic, see Savedoff 2000.
- [33] Digital culture has long supplied us with uncanny ruptures. For example, Vivian Sobchack has described the temporal field of the QuickTime format of the late 1990s as 'oneiric and uncanny ... its animations more effluvial than continuous. Full of gaps, gasps, starts, and repetitions ... they evoke for me not the seamlessly-lived and wholly present animation of "real-time" and "live-action" movies, but, rather, the "half-life" of certain time-worn and ambiguous kinetic objects: wooden puppets with chipped paint, forsaken dolls with gaping head wounds or missing limbs,

Muybridge-like figures in old flip books hovering with bravado and uncertainty between photograph and cinema' (1999, unpaginated).

- [34] Barthes 1982, p. 96.
- [35] Ibid., p. 27.
- [36] Ibid., p. 40.
- [37] Ibid., p. 95.
- [38] Ibid., p. 96.
- [39] Ibid., p. 96.
- [40] Krauss 1997, p. 192.
- [41] Cited from personal communication.
- [42] Bering-Porter 2014, p. 188.
- [43] Burg and Beck offer the following characterisation: 'A cinemagraph is a living moment in an otherwise still photograph. It exists in the world in between a photograph and video to bring to life the image and make it last forever.' <http://cinemagraphs.com/about/> (checked 6 February 2018).
- [44] Eppink comes close to acknowledging the cinemagraph as uncanny when noting that it effects 'a haunting moment seemingly stuck in time' (2014, p. 303).
- [45] Parkinson 2017.
- [46] 'People can't stop staring at them', Burg claims. He adds: 'Isn't that what advertisers want?' Quoted in Sloane 2015.
- [47] Freud 1971, p. 244.
- [48] Cixous 1976, p. 545.
- [49] Simmel 2004, p. 221.
- [50] The term mannequin, curiously uncanny in its own right, may refer both to a person modeling clothes and to the human-sized doll used to display them.
- [51] Bergson 1937, p. 26 [italics in original].
- [52] Ibid., p. 51.
- [53] The uncanny potentials of Chaplin's body are implicit in Gunning's fascinating account of how it 'transforms itself into the mechanical, the animal and even the vegetable ... achieving a plastic ontology in which inanimate objects become bodily appendages, and the body itself suddenly seems inert' (2010, p. 238).
- [54] Bergson 1937, p. 23.
- [55] Gunning 2003, p. 56.