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## Practitioners' Perspectives

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### The Aesthetic Uncanny: staging Dorian Gray

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#### Abstract

*This article discusses my theatrical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2008). Freud's concept of the uncanny (1919) was treated as a purely aesthetic phenomenon and related to late nineteenth century social and literary preoccupations such as Christianity, the supernatural and glamorous, criminal homosexuality. These considerations led to a conceptual ground plan that allowed for experiments during rehearsal in a form of theatrical shorthand.*

In this article I will discuss my approach to adapting Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2008.<sup>1</sup> The essay will address the uses that were made of a conceptual ground plan, which took the form of a set of very simple, but in practice very productive, assumptions drawn from the source material considered in its cultural-historical context. These framing assumptions were then deployed in the processes of both writing and staging the script. A pre-production script, almost entirely derived from language within the novel itself, was developed through four drafts before being tested and revised in the rehearsal room. The play had to be readied for performance in only two weeks; in addition, as is typical with productions tailored for the Edinburgh Fringe, the performance length had to be agreed upon with the producing venue several months before starting rehearsal – in this case, the piece had to come in under 55 minutes. With these parameters in mind, the ground plan, which started life as an attempt to address the problem of what to include and what to exclude, became a thematic road map; it was inevitably selective, as well as being subject to continual revision as the production took shape. We will broadly follow the chronological development of those ideas that went into the ground plan, in addition to describing how at the same time they collided with the demands of rehearsal. To speak of how the concepts behind the production evolved further in performance would take another article, and is not my concern here; I want instead to focus on the process of developing abstract ideas into rehearsal procedures.

#### Keywords

conceptual ground plan  
theatrical shorthand  
the uncanny  
defamiliarization

1 The production was a collaboration between the performing arts departments of the Universities of Lincoln and Central Lancashire, and performed to audiences averaging 89 per cent at C Soco studios, Chambers Street, Edinburgh during August 2008. The origin of this article was a paper given at the University of Lincoln for a symposium called 'Attend The Tale: New Contexts for Sweeney Todd', 31 May 2008.



To expand on this: the ground plan became a useful strategy for adaptation mainly because it led us towards making experiments in a kind of theatrical shorthand. The simplest definition of theatrical shorthand would be: *more is suggested than is seen or heard by the audience*. This has always been a central tenet in my work as a writer, deviser and director of theatre. I would argue that theatre-making – even in its most literal-minded formations – must deploy a form of shorthand, where the audience is invited to complete the gaps using their imaginations, even if only by virtue of certain practical constraints upon theatrical representation such as time, money, human ingenuity and so on. For the game of shorthand to work upon the audience, it is required that we put our attention on the thing signified *as it presents itself to our imaginations*. In practice, this proposition may entail a use of devices that may seem quite familiar to an audience, perhaps even clichéd. Yet the fact that a device – or the set of associations it calls to mind – has a certain familiar smack to an audience may well be essential to its effect. And this is the case if we are dealing, as we will be here, with the uncanny.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel which relies upon an uncanny event as its plot mechanism. A beautiful young man wishes he could switch places with his own portrait, so that he will remain young and beautiful in appearance while the face of the portrait will show the signs of aging and experience; shortly after he has wished for this impossibility, he discovers it is literally, inexplicably, coming true.

The spectre of Freud, who published his essay *Das Unheimliche* in 1919, hovers more than ever over the subject of the uncanny. It has been well observed by such critics as Nicholas Royle, in his exhaustive treatment of the subject (Royle 2003), that Freud sought to reverse the traditional understanding of the word *unheimlich* when he describes it as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1975: 220); indeed, it is an uncanny fact that the archaic root of the word 'canny' already contains its own opposite signification of 'uncanny' (see Royle 2003: 11). Freud, who appears to relish the paradoxes inherent in the term, says that something must be added to what is unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny, and this something is, perhaps surprisingly, a secondary meaning of the word *heimlich* itself as 'concealed, kept out of sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others' (Freud 1975: 223). Freud's agenda is to establish this old and familiar thing as a childhood anxiety which has been repressed and returns in the moment of the uncanny event. One critic has in fact read Wilde's novel as a parable of child abuse, though to be precise this is not, strictly speaking, child sexual abuse (Rashkin 1997).

In a curious manoeuvre, even though he acknowledges a debt to literature for furnishing him with the greater part of his evidence, Freud seems at the same time to devalue the literary uses of the uncanny as being disconnected from real life:

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life [...] But in this case he can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by

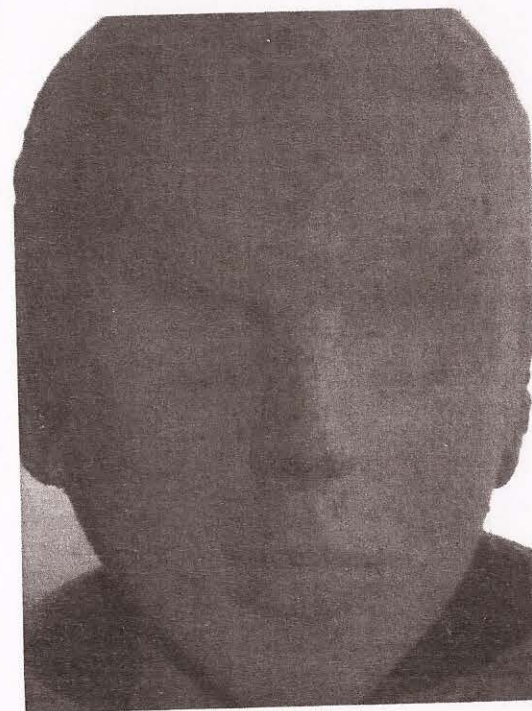


Figure 1: Study for the head of Dorian Gray puppet (courtesy of D. V. Tunstall).

bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact [...] We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences[...] But it must be added that his success is not unalloyed. We retain a feeling of dissatisfaction, a kind of grudge against the attempted deceit.

(Freud 1975: 251)

Any doubts we may harbour about Freud's hypothesis of the uncanny as it is manifested in the psyche arise, it would seem, from contradictory examples that we find only in fiction. Thus 'we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about' (1975: 247). But my point would be that we *do* not differentiate between the two. In fact, as Wilde would no doubt have reminded us, real life imitates art here too: I would argue that we learn to apply uncanny feelings to inexplicable events in life at least in part *by virtue of our contact with the uncanny in fiction*. In an interesting inversion of Freud's own unease, Wilde has Dorian Gray become fascinated by an actress while she is performing a play by Shakespeare; the moment she declares she wishes to abandon her art because, compared with her 'real' feelings for him, her art seems false, he becomes disgusted by her and rejects her. Again, Dorian's wilful journey into an abyss of degradation is shaped in large part by another work of fiction, known mysteriously as



'the yellow book'. In Freud's case, without the evidence of what we might call the Aesthetic Uncanny, he would not have any data to base his idea of the uncanny on at all, other than a few paltry anecdotes. His unease about this is palpable throughout the essay, and can be seen as related to an 'anxiety of influence' (see Bloom 1973) regarding such literary predecessors as Theodore Hoffmann.

Freud is, nonetheless, prepared to acknowledge that flirting with the supernatural can work well in fiction, as long as the writer 'keeps us in the dark' about 'the precise nature of the suppositions on which the world he writes about is based' (1975: 251). That was useful for our purposes, because it led us towards our first translation of theatrical shorthand: an aesthetic of *concealment*. This notion was not directly written into the script, but did greatly inform my intentions with respect to both the overall atmosphere of the play and the individual scenes. From the outset the stage was not replete; we used no scenery and no furniture at all. Taking Freud at his word, I decided to experiment with leaving both the characters and the audience in the dark at times, as in a sequence we devised to dramatize concisely Dorian's falling under the influence of the 'yellow book'. I wanted to suggest the idea of accumulating moments of depravity without robbing the actors of their sense of dignity, which we defined in terms of distance from the material. The scene was performed in near total darkness, with the audience's focus directed as far as possible by the actors themselves using lights hidden in their palms. They were able to indicate what might be happening through directing one's eyes to the reaction of a face, a hand, a piece of a kimono, and so on. Throughout this, the actors coolly delivered pieces of narrative – that were only related to their movements in an indirect fashion – to the audience.

From ideas of concealment we moved towards a concept of *defamiliarization* in the sense defined by Viktor Shklovsky of 'making strange' (Shklovsky 1990). We sought out a choreography that defamiliarized quotidian behaviour like walking, sitting, standing, eating, drinking, smoking – a sort of choreography in my imagination that was characterized as partaking of the quality of fog. We never tried to put fog onto the stage, or have characters reacting as if they were in fog. Following the lead of Jacques Lecoq who devised a programme of exercises he called *The Neutral Mask* (Lecoq 2002), the actors attempted to move in such a way that their motion had something of the actual quality of fog itself, something of its concealments and surprises, its atmospheric thickness that slows everything down a bit and forces us to look a little harder at the strange shapes emerging in our field of vision. Locating the rhythm in which to play, this atmosphere became very useful when we turned to look at a sequence in which Dorian visits an opium den, since it resonated with ideas of hallucinatory perception of both time and space.

In 1882, the French physiologist E. J. Marey built a gun-shaped camera able to take repeated photographs over short durations using paper-roll film in place of gelatine plates (see Rhodes 1976: 13ff). His chronophotography of human bodies in movement offered a compelling imagery to the new conceptual framework of behaviourism, of man as automaton; it thus prefigured time-and-motion studies and Futurism amongst other cults. The automaton, with its worrying implications for biology and free will, became central

to us in our quest for a shorthand. Just after a key moment in the story, the murder of the painter Basil Hallward by Dorian Gray, the actor playing Dorian was replaced by a rod puppet, about 80cm or so, and looking something like the actor. This puppet then intermittently took on the character of Dorian in his descent into criminality. These transitions were achieved in low light or carefully directed shafts of hand-held light, so that the puppet was never fully seen. Instead, the audience was directed to a movement of the head as the puppet suddenly burst into speech (although its mouth did not move), or its hand produced a cigarette seemingly out of nowhere, and to similar flashes of gesture and reaction. It is a conventional horror movie technique that the monster should not be revealed in its full glory until as late as possible; of course, here the technique was borrowed in order to fragment the puppet's presence into isolated images of specific body parts in movement and thus give the impression of Dorian locking himself away from the world of daylight like a vampire.

In order to do its work upon us, the rhetoric of the uncanny must be premised upon a conception of the world as a place that still contains dark corners of the inexplicable; inexplicable, that is, in scientific language (except as deception or self-deception as in Freud). Arguably it is true that Wilde flirts with scientific discourse in the novel, through the characters of both Dorian and, more fully, Lord Henry, who takes a kind of behaviourist interest in Dorian as a laboratory specimen. 'And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself,' writes Wilde, 'as he had ended by vivisectioning others' (Wilde 2006: 50). The referencing of vivisection calls to mind the attempts by George Henry Lewes, who wrote on the vivisection of frogs, to find a common ground between literature and science in psycho-physiology. Yet, as Wilde puts it in the novel, 'How shallow were the arbitrary definitions of ordinary psychologists!' (Wilde 2006: 51); Wilde may well have had Lewes in mind here (Wilde 2006: 205). Whatever the status of scientific discourse within the novel, the plot constantly invites us to accept the premise of an apparently supernatural event, an event that is not explicable within a rational frame of reference. There is, behind this requirement, an uncanny familiar assumption: that a *supernatural event is the manifestation of a wish*.

What made it possible for us to first grasp and then play out through decisions about performance this assumption that a supernatural event, and in particular one that makes possible acts of evil, is the manifestation of a wish? At one, really very simple, level the novel can be viewed as a theological parable, in which a story of temptation leading first to sin and then to self-destruction is mapped onto a story of a beautiful young man tricked by an inexplicable event into believing he can do anything he wants without punishment, and who is then finally punished. There are obvious resonances here with Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) (see Kahn and Cohen 1988). In order to get hold of the theological content of this story, as a parable of the wages of sin, it was necessary for me to suspend my personal disbelief in the supernatural – or rather to reconfigure this content as a form of imaginative play. We searched in rehearsal for a performable shorthand that might make manifest a Catholic Christian atmosphere, without resorting to a literal-minded reliance upon iconographic clichés. One example was a scene in which Dorian argues



<sup>2</sup> In fact at the time of writing the novel, the terms for homosexual behaviour were 'sodomy' and 'pederastia': it was only with the English translation of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1892 that the word 'homosexuality' began to be used. Thus descriptions of male-male sexual relations crisscrossed over the territories of religious sin, Hellenic euphemism and the emerging field of psychopathology (see Oosterhuis 2000).

with Lord Henry and Basil about his sudden engagement to Sybil: we played this out in a bar, where a visual echo of Manet's uncannily ambiguous painting *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*/Bar at the Folies-Bergère (1882) helped to disguise the obvious theological associations of a glass of red wine. In this case, the performer who played Sybil Vane was also silently serving the drinks in this scene, her presence intended to foreground for the audience the connection between the actress and the barmaid as an object within the discourse of the male characters, as if existing only for their pleasure. Thus we attempted to embed the theological within other cultural associations to provide a rich visual-symbolic texture.

There were other reasons for this attempt at blended, or embedded, imagery. The decision to pursue religious symbolism can be justified by the narrative's structure, which, as we have noted, loosely resembles a parable. In fact, there were reviews in Christian magazines which saw it as such and praised it as such at the time. But a difficulty arises when we read the preface. 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.' (Wilde 2006: 3). To reduce this temporarily to biography: it may be little more than a rear-guard action against the aggressive criticism of high-minded Victorian readers, some of whom condemned the novel as depraved. But why did they? Surely this book is a clear-cut example of a story about the wages of sin, and thus not immoral at all, but on the contrary, having the ethical authority of a Christian fable? It is very easy to read the book as depraved – from within a late Victorian bourgeois context. This is made possible by the interaction of the assumption that a supernatural event is the manifestation of a wish with other root assumptions of that culture, namely that a crime is a guilty secret and homosexuality is a guilty secret, and thus homosexuality is a crime – which for many Victorians was of course no mere metaphor but a literal fact. And that is the important point here: for Wilde's reading public, a supernatural explanation of homosexuality as a real crime in the real world was not required.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, these assumptions call up the spectre of the uncanny, as Nicholas Royle indicates when he argues that by its very nature the uncanny is queer and the queer is uncanny (Royle 2003: 43). In addition, the very notion of the uncanny can be viewed as threatening to the comforting stability of religious belief (Royle 2003: 21). The principle of the uncanny deepens one's reading of the novel since it allows us an insight into a key strategy of Wilde's: to use it as a technique for prising apart and thus defamiliarizing certain assumptions of late Victorian culture, based as they seem to be in a simple metaphor given the status of a common-sense truth.

We found ourselves theologically in further trouble when we arrived at another concept at work in this novel: that a book is a toxic agent, as in the sequence following Dorian's journey through various attempts to gratify his senses, in imitation of the notorious fictional hero des Esseintes in J. K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884). This metaphorical concept in turn derives from a simpler, deeper one: that immoral ideas are poisons. This concept contradicts Wilde's own words in the Preface, that books cannot be immoral. The book itself postulates the concept that books can be immoral, as here: 'Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he

could realize his conception of the beautiful' (Wilde 2006: 124). Thus, the status of this assumption is rendered radically ambivalent: uncannily, it is both true and not true at the same time. To recognize that certain powerful cultural assumptions are distorted in this way through contamination by the uncanny is to begin to understand the subtle power of the frame.

In rehearsal we played with picture frames not as if they were only picture frames, but as demonically proliferating, moving and transforming in the space. They became doors, bar tops, windows, banisters, mirrors, balconies; frames in movement, held by the actors, shifting one's perspective without ever fully coming to rest. Our intention was to foreground the act of framing itself, 'framing' here suggesting the attempt to hold down the spreading influence of the uncanny in the story. When Dorian first visits a theatre in the East End and spots Sybil Vane on stage, the actors produced a miniature proscenium arch at which Dorian gazed from a distance using opera glasses. Into the space of this frame appeared the audience's first image of Sybil: a Victorian porcelain doll that I found in a market, whose torso we replaced with cloth and who we dressed as a boy and transformed into another rod puppet, smaller than the Dorian-puppet, to play out the role of Shakespeare's Rosalind-as-Ganymede, lit by little handheld torches that called to mind theatrical footlights. By contrast, with the Dorian-puppet we rejected any notion that the doll should be kept in a stable optical perspective: its weird dwarfishness when standing alongside the actors was purposefully foregrounded in its scenes to further emphasize the atmosphere of hallucinatory distortion.

Following a line of thought provoked by the proposition that 'immoral ideas are poisons', the concept of influence became critical for us. We found ourselves playing with what Steven Connor calls the 'vocalic uncanny': that is, all the forms of ventriloquism – speaking for a doll, speaking for others, throwing your voice in empty spaces, appearing to speak but not making a sound, and so on (Connor 2000). In this my intention was to find a theatrical translation for the idea of influence as a nonmaterial process, as expressed here:

- Basil:** If Dorian wishes it, of course you must stay. Dorian, don't pay attention to what he says. He has a very bad influence over all his friends.
- Dorian:** Have you really, Lord Henry?
- Henry:** There's no such thing as a good influence, Mr Gray. To influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He becomes an actor of a part not written for him.

In a further extension of the concept, the actors rarely left the stage; they were almost always there, hovering just out of sight, like apparitions or familiars, at other times attending to the scene, serving it and also influencing it in some subtle way. As Dorian reached for a knife with which to murder the praying Basil Hallward, an actor was ready at hand with a knife – an action we duplicated at the close of the play when Dorian used the same knife to stab the portrait. We found parallel moments with frames, paintbrushes, drinks, spectacles and pieces of costume such as a red kimono used by Sybil in a dressing room scene and later worn by Dorian.

As we worked through the adaptation, I became interested in how the concept of criminal behaviour is handled in the book, and how this



conceptual handling connects with general ideas about crime in Victorian society. One useful context for me was the psycho-physiology of feelings. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Charles Darwin attempted to codify the relationship between inner states of feeling and outward expressions of those states in the body and face. Inevitably – given their powerful cultural charge – Darwin's concepts were rewritten, as both a series of folk commonplaces about the criminal mind and a set of pseudo-scientific rationalizations for punitive measures against the disprivileged – most notoriously in Cesare Lombroso's infamous categorizations of criminal types based upon inherited physical features of the skull and face like jutting jawbones and shifty eyes (Lombroso 2006). For our purposes, there were much more useful ideas to be dug out of Darwin's text than this almost comically literal transposition might suggest. For example, he writes: 'Under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment,' then adds as a footnote, 'Mr Wedgwood says that the word "shame" may well originate in the idea of shade or concealment, and may be illustrated by the Low German *scheme*, shade or shadow' (Darwin 1998: 320). A cultural assumption, harking back to *The Book of Genesis*, can be inferred here, that feelings of shame are shadowy places. Jack the Ripper's notorious crimes, which clearly lurk behind Wilde's novel, were committed in the dark, and offered up a new and particularly vicious turn on the familiar tropes of evil as darkness, truth as light and seeing as understanding. Such tropes may take a particular cultural form, as they do in the Bible for example, but however clichéd they may seem to us, their powers of attraction persist because they operate at a very basic level of embodied meanings (see Turner 1996). Freud had an intimation of this in his additional explanation of the uncanny effect as a result of animistic beliefs, as elaborated upon by Robin Lydenberg:

Animism – which finds its rhetorical expression in apostrophe – is the basis of narration, for it gives bodily form to the disembodied. And animation defines the work both of the writer, whose imaginative creativity animates what is not there, and of the reader, who animates the figure and voice of the narrator. Ghostwriter and ghost reader participate in the same magical procedure [...]. (Lydenberg 1997: 1083)

Thus, as one would expect, the crimes in *Dorian Gray* happen in shadowy places. But, again, Wilde seems to find the connotations here in need of some unpacking through a process of defamiliarization. The most thrilling of these revisions occurs in the episode where Dorian visits the opium den in the East End, imaged generally as a very underlit place where (naturally) crimes happen, and reflecting something of that same fascination for the voyeuristic and exploitative visitor as the Empire did within British culture (see Warwick 1999: 81). James Vane, who, without ever having met Dorian, holds him responsible for the suicide of his own sister, corners him at gunpoint in a dark alley near the docks. When Dorian's face is revealed to him under a lamplight, Vane suddenly believes he must have the wrong person, since Dorian does not look old enough to be the man he has sought for twenty years. So Vane lets Dorian go free. It is assumed here that we will have a common-sense assumption that the marks of crime would show on

the physiognomy. Yet the bringing-to-light of the criminal gives the lie to that supposition in this moment. The criminal is brought into the light, only for his pursuer to decide that he is not the criminal after all.

I suggest that it is in part this violation of a common assumption about crime – that the marks of crime, and by extension of all experience, can be read on the face – that led commentators to declare the book immoral on its first publication. In the *Scots Observer*, for instance, W. E. Henley declared that the book was concerned with 'matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing in camera' (Wilde 2006: xxi). Recalling the late Victorian cultural assumption that homosexuality is a crime, we should conclude that homosexual behaviour is a crime that leaves a physiognomic trace upon the body; being a crime, it is also a guilty secret, inducing feelings of shame, and therefore it is something the criminal homosexual will try to conceal in shadowy places; its truth as crime will play out in a physical manifestation. But the reality is that this set of assumptions is wilfully negated at every turn in the story by events that produce uncanny vibrations, such as the Dorian/James Vane encounter, where the presence of the Woman, played by an actor who illuminated the scene with a handheld light to suggest a street lamp, once again served to induce a ghostly unease:

Dorian: Stop! – how long is it since your sister died?  
 James: Eighteen years. Why do you ask me?  
 Dorian: Eighteen years! Set me under the lamp and look at my face!  
*James drags Dorian under a lamplight.*  
 James: My God! I would have murdered you! Forgive me, sir. I was deceived.  
 Dorian: You'd better go home. And put that pistol away.  
*Dorian turns on his heel and walks away. After a moment the Woman appears under the light.*  
 Woman: Why didn't you kill him? You should have killed him.  
 James: The man whose life I want must be nearly forty now. This one is little more than a boy.  
 Woman: Why man, it's nigh on eighteen years since Prince Charming made me what I am. He hasn't changed much since then. I have, though.  
 James: You're lying!  
 Woman: I swear before God I'm telling the truth! But don't give me away to him. I'm afraid of him. Let me have some money for my night's lodging.  
*James steps forward to see if he can see Dorian. But Dorian has gone. When he comes back, the Woman has gone also.*

It is only in the final three sentences of the last chapter, which read, 'Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was' (Wilde 2006: 188), that this negation of the assumption that crime can be read on the face is itself negated through a supernatural inversion. It proved very difficult to find a satisfactory staging of this final moment. This was not really due to the technical challenge of representing a rapid corruption of the actor's face: a simple theatrical illusion made it relatively easy for the actor to don a repulsive death mask without revealing the trick. The problem was more one of tone of that almost inevitable sense of anticlimax hinted at by Maria M. Tatar when she writes, 'Once the token of repression is



lifted from an uncanny event, what was formerly *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich*: the once hostile world becomes habitable again' (Tatar 1981: 182). This observation, which is both true and not true since the *unheimlich* and the *heimlich* are always bound together, nonetheless returns me to the ambivalence, the uncertainty at the heart of my own aesthetic practice. That is to say, the insistent demand that theatre must make things manifest, without which there can be no theatre, is also a betrayal of the very thing which makes theatre most compelling to me: the thing that refuses to be represented as theatre.

The attempt to stage the idea of sudden repulsiveness led me back to a refinement of the word 'uncanny'. Now it took on a revised meaning for me as an aesthetic phenomenon, not in Freud's sense of 'aesthetic' as simply referring to its deployment in art or even that further sophistication of his by critics such as Royle as inherent in the very act of reading, but instead as a principle of 'beauty'. Beauty can be seen, and in our times typically is seen, as consisting in the appearance of glamour. Glamour, a word with Scottish roots in magic and enchantment, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*; it makes its first appearance in the early eighteenth century and, like the term 'uncanny', by the mid-nineteenth century its supernatural associations have been partially revoked in favour of a concept of mysteriously exciting or alluring physical attractiveness, or deceptive charm or beauty. We see Dorian in his glamour; he embodies a principle of physical beauty; traditionally, physical beauty was equated with virtue, as we find in countless examples in Ancient Greek art and philosophy, medieval iconography, Renaissance art and poetry, and in the multifarious figurations of the Romantic Agony such as the Gothic novel – all of which are obvious touchstones for Oscar Wilde. But the novel dissociates physical beauty from virtue. Wilde's rhetorical strategy of inversion is well-trodden critical ground; however, in *Dorian Gray* the principle of dissociation produces a radically uncanny ambiguity. This ambiguity exists because in discriminating between physical beauty and moral beauty, Wilde is attempting to dismantle a very basic assumption; one that, like evil is darkness, truth is light and seeing is understanding, crosses over historical and cultural boundaries until it is embedded in our imaginations as to seem both banal and primal, and at the same time without traceable origins: the concept that physical perfection is moral perfection.

Writing about acting, George Lewes speaks of the ideal of a mind 'in vigilant supremacy controlling expression, directing every intonation, look, and gesture' (in Roach 1993: 189, original emphasis). For Lewes, the body was the objective aspect of a subjective process called mind. But *Dorian Gray* offers us the utter strangeness of a mind severed from its connection to the body, so that physical perfection is shown to have no authentic relationship to moral perfection. This is not merely the predictable technique of Wildean inversion: if that were so, the effect would be as expected – decorative and amusing rather than uncanny. What is at stake here is a fundamental operation of the psyche, its very capacity to know truth or evil. The mind of Dorian, as it seeks out sensuous experiences in the manner of the Marquis de Sade, has no outward manifestation on the body. It is possible to connect this with Lewes's acting theory: the demonic becomes synonymous with the absence of outward signs of

inner life. This is understood as deeply unnatural, but of course the guilty secret of criminal sexuality in Victorian London did at times leave no socially identifiable physical marks, and thus was not brought to light except by chance. This was the case in the example of the Cleveland Street Scandal, which happened not in the East End but in the West End of London, did not involve bestial-looking lower class thugs, but aristocratic young clients who paid young men at the local post office for sexual favours: this was what led W.E. Henley to splutter that the novel was aimed at 'outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys' (Wilde 2006: xxi). Lord Henry says, 'Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime is to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations' (Wilde 2006: 179). Simon Joyce, arguing as I do here for an unfashionably serious and sincere version of Oscar Wilde, believes that *Dorian Gray* 'offers an exemplary critique' of the notion of the 'privileged offender' as 'the product of a wish fulfilment which had the useful effect of diverting attention away from genuine social problems of poverty, unemployment and labour unrest' (Joyce 2002: 503). For Joyce, a key tactic for achieving this critique of crime as a fine art is the focus on motiveless actions – an uncanny strategy, of course. Wilde has substituted the terms of the assumption so they now read: physical perfection is moral ugliness. Does Dorian have a conscience, or does he simply play with the idea of having a conscience?

We played with the concept of physical perfection in workshops. We found, perhaps not surprisingly given our own culture's gender-inflected obsession with the subject, that it was more easily grasped – or rather, grasped as a performance – by our female participants than by our male ones. As a result, the cast was all-female. Women played men and women in the drama. This helped us to achieve a defamiliarization of certain entailments of the narrative which at times struck us, and some critics, as misogynist.<sup>3</sup> Having an all-women cast offered us an opportunity for a theatrical distancing from that same misogynistic impulse. In rehearsals, we worked upon an imitation of a certain mode of masculinity that foregrounded its performative aspects without the need to resort to a rather tired and outmoded attempt at camp flippancy, a style which does little justice to either the radical ambivalence of Wilde or the complexities of camp itself<sup>4</sup>.

The performers delivered their text quickly, coolly and purposefully, thereby lending it an edge of quiet viciousness. This was in part a function of the limited amount of stage time we had to get the story told, yet for us it took on the feeling of a genuine discovery and a challenge to achieve a certain cruel and evasive style of so-called maleness. Dressed similarly to each other, their costumes drained of colour or decoration other than individualized cravats, they appeared at times like inward-looking apparitions. Their boyish presences called up uncanny tropes of sexual ambiguity and the doppelgänger, while their moments of comic lightness were laced with an eerily self-conscious sense of guilt or foreboding.

To sum up: we arrived, both by design and by accident, at a set of framing assumptions, drawn from our source material, that we used for theatre-making; standing behind all of them was the spectre of the uncanny, reconfigured from Freud's original hypothesis, so that it was stripped of its psychoanalytic justification and rendered as a purely aesthetic notion – a

3 For a defence of Oscar Wilde's attitudes to women, or rather 'modern' women, see Stetz 2001.

4 Interestingly, Moe Meyer (Meyer 1994: 80–81) outlines a relationship between Wilde's construction of a performative Self and the Delsarte system, designed as it was to disclose the interior life of the artist through aestheticized movement.



provocation for technique, as it were. My own justification for doing this is that the concept is rather more of an aesthetic phenomenon than Freud himself would have cared to admit, since almost all of his evidence for it is from fictional sources such as Hoffmann. These assumptions led us towards a set of context-bound solutions to the issue of making things manifest. As I have tried to show, the theatre cannot avoid the effort and the contradictions involved in making things manifest. For me, this is crucial insofar as it intersects with my personal aesthetic of a theatre that is in essence always 'incomplete', always uncomfortable with the claustrophobia of illusion. The game of theatrical shorthand is an extremely useful tool for helping us to create meaning out of that necessary incompleteness. There lies the key to its uncanny power.

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