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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 2008.1 This 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 ready 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 these 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
defamiliarisation

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 CSco studio, Chambers Street, Edinburgh during August 2008. The origins of this article was a paper given at the University of Lincoln for a symposium called Memorial Tales: New Contexts for Samuel Field, 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 literate 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 notion 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 childhood 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 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 unaudible. 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 willful journey into an abyss of degradation is shaped in large part by another work of fiction, known mysteriously as...
that we were only a sort of control framework. Visits of opium den surprises: its something of the nature of its conceals in the choreography in a way like walking on gelatine platform (graphs over short duration). It's face, a hand, a word, what might be ha...

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with Lord Henry and Basil about his sudden engagement to Sybil. We played this out in a bar, where a visual echo of Maeterlinck's unambiguously 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 able to serve the drinks in this scene, her presence intended to foreground for the audience the connection between the actress and the harlot 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 the 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 reassertion of the agnostic criticism of high-minded Victorian readers, some of whom condemned the novel as depraved. 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? Is it 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 more 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. 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 queerness is uncanny (Royle 2003: 43). In addition, the very notion of the uncanny can be viewed as threatening 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, and as gratifying to the senses, in imitation of the notorious fictionalRod puppet, Donan, on which to perform his uncanny tricks. That is, the Dorian puppet, with which to hold 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 familiar spirits, 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 omen we duplicated at the close of the play when Dorian used the same knife to stab the portrait. We found parallel moments with frames, 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
A conceptual handling connects with general ideas about crime in Victorian society. One useful context for me was the psycho-physiology of feelings. We attempted to codify the relationship between inner states of feeling and their powerful external signs — 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 intuition of this in his additional explanation of the uncanny effect as a result of animistic beliefs, as elaborated by Robin Lyndenberg:

Animism — which finds its rhetorical expression in apocalypse — 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 [...] (Lyndenberg 1997: 108).

Thus, as one would expect, the crimes in Dorian Gray happen in shadowy places. But, again, Wilde seems to find the connivance here in need of some unpacking through a process of destabilization. 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 assumption 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 seen 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: xxii). Recalculating 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, incurring feelings of shame, and therefore it is something, the criminal homosexual will try to conceal in shadowy places. As it is true of crime will play out as 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/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 drops Dorian under a lamplight.
James: My God! I would have murdered you! Foul I was. 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 righ on eighteen years since Prince Charmimg 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 right'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 recognised 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...'

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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 'esthetic' as simply referring to its deployment in art or even that further generalization 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 Oxford English Dictionary; it makes its first appearance in the early eighteenth century and, like the term 'uncanny', by the mid-nineteenth century its 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 multilayered figurations of the Romantic Agency such as the Gothic novel - destroys physical beauty from virtue. Wilde's rhetorical strategy of inversion is well-trodden critical ground; however, in Dorian Gray the principle of disassociation produces an 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, crossed over historical and cultural boundaries until it is embedded in our imaginations as to seem banal and prunil, 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' (Roach 1993: 189, original emphasis). For Lewes, 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 Wilde's 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 senuous 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
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.

References