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Uncanny Landscapes: an introduction

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Uncanny Landscapes: an introduction

This special issue started life as a panel at the interdisciplinary conference *Wild or Domesticated: Uncanny in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives to Mind*, organized by the Finnish “Mind and Other Research Project” and the Finnish Anthropological Society, in Helsinki in 2016. In the workshop, we wanted to add a material dimension to the conference’s overall focus on Mind, and to capitalize on the range of scholarship that looked at people’s material engagements with the landscapes around them. The panel brought together artists, performers and film-makers with a group of anthropologists whose work we present here, who all in their different ways consider “uncanny landscapes” as manifestations of material religion. The anthropology of religion entreats us to “take seriously” the religious experience of others (Cannell 2006: 3). This experience often involves engagement with supernatural entities that either dwell within, or are part of, the landscape. Our concern is to understand this “excess”, conceptually and experientially, in ways that take it seriously.

Landscape

In recent years, anthropological conceptualisations of landscape have shifted to a notion of environment. In part, this was due to the ocularcentric characterisation of landscape as principally *seen* within Western European thought, instigated through the cultural commodification of landscape framed almost exclusively in a visual aesthetic appreciation (Darby 2000: 53). Hirsch recounts that the word *landscape* was introduced into the English language as a technical term used by painters in the late sixteenth century, with origins in the Dutch word “landscap” (1995: 2), suggesting that “what came to be seen as landscape was recognised as such because it reminded the viewer of the painted landscape” (ibid.). This

reliance on sight as the sensory guarantor of landscape is particularly problematic when considering the *unseen* presences within uncanny landscapes, but was more broadly challenged by the phenomenological turn of environmental anthropology.

The work of Tim Ingold was instrumental in shifting perspectival notions of landscape towards the environment, through Heideggerian notions of “dwelling” - an approach that “demands a perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings” (Ingold 2000: 5). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception (2005) and Gibson’s notion of “affordances” (1979), there has been considerable ethnography of the ways in which perception is afforded by the environment and our human experience within it through an emphasis on affordances and materialities. This has been examined exploring environmental materialities including weather and embodied practises such as walking (Ingold 2010).

This emphasis on the affordances of the ecological environment for the perception of the individualised phenomenological subject has side-lined the significance of culture (Howes 2010). With that, it often lacked acknowledgement of *inspired* landscapes - reducing human experience and engagement with the environment to the play of material affordances and bodily capacities – conceived in Western terms as “natural”. It did not take religious presences and religious experiences seriously, as does, for example, Abram’s conception of the “more than human” (1997). For Abram, humans are embedded in a world that is fundamentally animated: “our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth” (1997: 22). At the same time, post-phenomenological approaches in human geography have transcended the

assumption of phenomenology's "pregiven subject" to instead consider "landscape as a thing in itself... as something that engenders its own effects and affects" (2006: 542).

"Uncanny" experiences can disrupt the propagated sense of participatory engagement with the environment posited through dwelling perspectives and prompts recognition of these agential capacities of landscape. This special issue gathers around this concern to explore the agentive qualities of what has been called "landscape" or "environment" – perhaps pointing to the necessities to think about these terms, their histories, and to consider the opportunities posed by "the uncanny" for moving these forward. We examine what experiences of the "uncanny", across a range of contexts, can reveal about this "thing" or "beingness" that we have referred to through notions including the "landscape", "environment" and the "more-than-human-world".

The Uncanny

The "uncanny" is not a stable notion but has been refracted and reworked to various contexts and purposes for understanding. Freud popularised the term in the early twentieth century, defining the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads us back to something long known to us, once familiar" (2015, 220). The original German word *unheimlich*, translated as "uncanny", is negative to *heimlich* which is translated as "homely" and familiar. Yet the term "canny" in Scottish and North English etymology refers to that which is agreeable, but also that which is cunning or supernaturally powerful (Royle 2003, 10-11). The *unheimlich/uncanny* thus dwells at the hinge of that which is familiar and unfamiliar, homely and unhomely, natural and supernatural or unnatural.

Psychoanalytic interpretations of the “uncanny” locate its emergence firmly within the human “self” - and as a (re)emergence to consciousness of unconscious emotion (Rahimi 2013). This special issue, by contrast, explores how such understandings might be reconfigured in the context of uncanny experiences with the landscape, acknowledged as a “more-than-human” world, extending beyond the “self”. As Shaw explained, “it is a strand of Western arrogance to believe that everything ‘unnatural’ that occurs is somehow a psychological response to some shift in the human mind, as if that were the centre of all the action” (2016: 202).

Whilst the uncanny is usually identified as an experiential affect that “disturbs the body” (Trigg 2012, 27), this is fundamentally a disturbance of our sense of being in the world. Yet experiences, responses, feelings and interpretations of these disturbances – and the very qualities of these – are inconsistent and need to be contextualised. Rather than applying the notion of the uncanny to varied European and non-European contexts as a form of conceptual colonialism, we may reflect on the varied cultural contexts in which the “uncanny” emerges, to reconfigure the concept itself.

Writing about indigenous Australia, for example, Ginsburg described a “distinctive Indigenous relationship” to the uncanny that is “shaped by a sense of comfort with ancestral presence, as well as a deep recognition of being haunted by a legacy of destruction of Aboriginal people” (2018, 68). Describing the cultural politics and aesthetics of a “settler uncanny” to explain how “the bush becomes an uncanny location for the return of what a settler colonial country has repressed to establish its identity as master: white Australia’s fear of retribution for the Aboriginal land, culture, and people it dispossessed” (2018, 69). This experience of the “indigenous uncanny” inverts associative reactions of fright for comfort and haemorrhages the centrality of the individualised “self” conjured in psychoanalytic approach,

by inviting recognition of the sedimented histories, memories and trauma within the landscape. Gelder and Jabobs described how the haunted sites of Australian ghost stories may appear empty or uninhabited, yet these sites “work to influence or impress people who are always passing through, people who take the effects of those sites elsewhere when they leave (as they usually do), spreading them across the nation” (1998: 31). This points to the potentiality of haunted sites to “dramatically extend” influence through haunted stories that “spirals out of itself to affect others elsewhere, perhaps influencing the nation’s wellbeing” (ibid.). How might we take seriously the capacities and potentialities of landscapes in generating these effects? In doing this, how might we approach the inhabitants or various aspects of this landscape in their more-than-human forms? Murphy considers the latter in exploring how we might “approach the ghost as a real entity as well as a metaphorical, interpretative lens through which to understand the transgenerational trauma and suffering inflicted by settler colonial violence” (Murphy 2018, 332).

Just as we might question the centrality of European notions of the self in our understanding of the uncanny, so too should we question the links between the uncanny and modernity. Inasmuch as the uncanny represents a form of enchantment of the world, its latent or repressed presence runs counter to the Weberian narrative of modern disenchantment (Weber 1948). Does this mean, then, that uncanny or enchanted landscapes are themselves by definition non-modern; even perhaps pre-modern? Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the uncanny can be traced back to the Christianisation of Europe, which suppressed paganism and broke people’s relationship to nature (2005, 58-59, see also Schneider 1990). The uncanny lurked under the surface of Christian – and later secular – Europe; as heresy, or in the modern context, irrationality, which is itself modernity’s heresy (Favret-Saada 1990). As Bruno Latour argues, though, the narrative of modernity is really only that – a narrative – and just as “we have never been modern”, so too have we never been able to eradicate enchantment.

Rather, it lurks in modern contexts as much as pre-modern and post-modern, as the latent potentiality of the uncanny.

This special issue brings together both European and non-European examples. It has become fashionable – particularly when dealing with non-European contexts – to invoke a turn to ontology in explanation of animated landscapes (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017). This not only risks reinforcing an exoticizing West – Rest distinction, it also neglects the indeterminate, contextual and often threatening emergence of the uncanny. The uncanny is not necessarily a harmonious enchantment in which people dwell at one within nature and landscape. It is uncertain, unpredictable, alarming.

The Contributions

Cornish reveals a collapse in conventional dualistic notions of the “canny” associated with “homeliness” and the “uncanny” as “unhomely” by demonstrating the experiences of modern-day witches “at home” in the “uncanny” of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall, UK, and its surrounding networks of sacred sites. Uncanniness is located as a sensuous and embodied feeling invoked through folk magic items displayed in the museum and the animated materialities of the tangibly inspirited sacred sites inhabited by *genius loci* (spirit of place) surrounding the museum. Plotting contemporary witchcraft traditions within modern nature-based polytheistic Pagan religions growing in Britain since the 1950s, we follow Cornish’s walk through this landscape with Sarah, a self-identified “traditional witch” to examine anticipatory encounters with the uncanny materialised as an inspirited landscape through the imagination, senses, storytelling, histories, temporality, kinship and home.

Mitchell considers the possibilities of the landscape as a subject or agent that may have the potential to contain, store or transmit memories of their past which are engaged experientially as the uncanny in the Neolithic temple site of Borg-in-Nadur in Southern Malta. A site of prehistoric ritual activity, Borg-in-Nadur has more recently been a site for national and transnational Goddess pilgrimage, and significant devotion to the Virgin Mary who has appeared regularly in apparitions. Mitchell therefore asks why some landscapes are regarded as spiritually animated by different social groups at different times, and what this reveals about the landscape. Through sensuous engagement with the materiality of stone of the Maltese Temples, Goddess pilgrims experienced a concertina-ing of time through the animation of prehistoric Goddess cult embodied within the landscape. Whilst for devotee to the Virgin Mary, Angelik and his followers, the power of place was in the positioning of the Temple within the wider landscape and its distinctive features of water and stone. It is through the agential materialities of the Borg-in-Nadur temple site and the sensuous experience of this that the uncanny emerges.

Petty shows the landscape as actant provoking uncanny experiences that shifts senses of self-landscape relations among walkers who have impaired vision traversing the South Downs National Park in Southern England. Optical tropes have pervaded notions of both self-landscape relations and notions of the “uncanny” in contemporary European intellectual thought. Through ethnography of experienced “blindness”, visual motifs are refracted to reveal the multisensorial, visceral and palpable qualities of the uncanny and reconfigurations of the “visual” nature of the uncanny in blindness. Uncanny experiences are shown to shift senses of landscape relations, but also reveals a landscape that is not an inherently participatory and readily available medium of perception. Rather than reduced to a “medium” or end product of perception, the landscape is shown to be a presence that is also agentially distinct and engaged with, or even *met*, as one would a person.

Pearce challenges notions of landscape that have privileged the values of wisdom, belongingness and connectedness rooted in Heideggerian notions of dwelling through his fieldwork in the predominately Buddhist valley of Zangskar in the western Indian Himalaya. Story brings to the fore less positive landscape associations of fear, uncertainty and what he describes as disorientating “uncanny minglings of the familiar and the strange that emerges from the limitations of ordinary human knowledge and perception” in the Zangskari landscape. The uncanny is situated in encounters with the hidden places of semi-human beings and spirits that come with night fall, when the boundaries are dissolved, and the strange and familiar are collapsed. Pearce describes the conscious disengagement, active engagement, and appeasement of the more-than-human landscape with Buddhism as a “civilising project that brings order to basically hostile and intransigent land”.

Aisher recounts uncanny experiences and spirit-attack and soul abduction among upland members of the Nyishi tribe in the eastern Himalayas through an auto-ethnographic mode and focus on story. This article traces his changing understandings of these realities, through which he attempts to “take seriously” the lifeworlds of his respondents and “began to sense other eyes upon me”. Aisher recounts what he described as an “unhealthy ontological entanglement”, warning that some scholars are “quick to celebrate the existence of spirits and how they re-enchant the world, without recognising the shadow side of such conceptions”. Through conscious ontological disentanglement, Aisher proposes the “redemptive symmetry” of a multispecies approach that honours traumatic social and more-than-human histories within “an environment that both actively gives and retrieves wealth from the human realm”. This approach recognises a more-than-human sociality that decentres humans as primary agents, drawing attention to the framing of human agency “as in some ways subordinate to, and interfused with, the agency of sovereign ecologies”.

Emergent Themes

We have chosen to frame our analysis in relation to landscape and the uncanny, but there are a number of other latent themes within the papers, which might provoke a different framing. We have already signalled some of the problems with the turn to ontology when looking at the “apparently irrational”. As well as its overly-systemic assumptions, the “ontological turn” is also, in our view, overly-dependent on (Western) philosophising. Holbraad’s somewhat flippant comment that anthropology is philosophy with the people in it, “only without the people” (2010: 185), is revealing, in that it demonstrates a central concern with ideas, and a presumption that thought is the primary, perhaps defining, human activity. We disagree. People don’t just think. They also sense, feel, emote, experience the world and move around it. The other themes – and other anthropologies – to which our work might speak, then, are anchored in these experiential grounds of being.

The first theme is *sensoriality*. Petty’s paper speaks more specifically to an anthropology of the senses, but they all could be read through the lens of the senses. If the uncanny is an experiential phenomenon, then it is also simultaneously a sensory phenomenon. The second is *temporality*. Time and memory play an important part in our understanding of the uncanny; as the uncanny invokes visions and experiences of past and future. Third, and related, is the issue of *narrative* – be it “traditional” stories told about places and persons, or testimony and witness of uncanny events. Finally, in their different ways the papers all refer to *movement*, and more specifically, walking. This takes us back to Ingold (2000), whose work pioneered the anthropology of walking, but in a frame that foregrounds the material phenomenology of body’s engagement with ground. For us, walking also informs the immaterial; the religious; the uncanny.

In their engagements with the materiality of landscape across diverse geographical, historical and political contexts, people encounter supernatural presences, spirits, deities. This special issue seeks to understand these encounters in a way that takes them seriously, and avoids explaining them away as an epiphenomenon of some more “natural”, ecological or psychological processes. Rather, it sees the uncanny in landscapes, and people’s experiences of them, as itself a normal – perhaps natural – feature of humans’ engagement with the “more-than-human”. This asks for a recognition of the agency of the animated landscape, that extends far beyond the realm of the human, and invites us to consider our posthuman, multispecies and more-than-human entanglements.

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