

*Uncanny As Missed Lack —Uncanny's Pre-ontological Position as a Premise for
Paradoxical Conceptual Art*

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Abstract

In this article, I will focus on two issues: first, the essential connotations of the Uncanny and the underlying reason for the Uncanny in this study as a phenomenon that reveals the reality behind the appearance of the artwork, i.e., Uncanny as missed lack. The second question focuses on the reasons for locating the Uncanny in a pre-ontological position. For the first question, I will begin by clarifying that the essence of the Uncanny is the direct presentation of *Tuché*, that is, the confrontation of person with *das Ding*, that is, the direct presentation of the Real as Lack. This will be distinguished from the concealment and utilisation of the Real in the conscious symbolic order, and the substitution of the Real in the unconscious representational order. Subsequently, I will focus on *Tuché* as an encounter with the Real can only be grasped as missed, whether in conscious or unconscious structures. This missed form is then linked to the second issue of this study, which is that missed lack, with its paradoxical logical structure, transcends ontological constraints and cannot be anchored by ontological narratives. Because of its paradoxical character, missed lack cannot be described simply as an 'is', but rather as a failed 'is'. In this paper, the discussion of the first issue draws heavily on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, while the second needs to be supplemented by the related idea of Derrida's *aporia*. Clarity on both aspects of the Uncanny helps establish a firm precondition for creating paradoxical conceptual artworks.

Keywords: Uncanny, Tuche, The Real, Unconscious

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Introduction

This research aims to explore how the paradoxical conceptual artworks can reveal the possible reality behind the works through the dialectical art paradigm of 'failure'. In this essay, I will focus on the crucial precondition for this central theme, namely the experience of the revelation of the Real that lies behind the work, i.e., the Uncanny, and focus on the pre-ontological position that the Uncanny occupies within that theory. In that essay, I will begin by pointing out the non-experiential essence of the Uncanny, i.e., that the Uncanny is not a positive phenomenon but an encounter (Tuché). Subsequently, I will argue that the kernel of Tuche is the primordial confrontation between the person and das Ding, what Lacan claims to be the Real, and that the Real is presented as a Lack in both the conscious and the unconscious realms. Finally, I will demonstrate that the viewing subject can only grasp this lack in the missed form. I will use Derrida's analysis of the aporia to indicate that it is through the missed form that the Uncanny can transcend ontological limitations and become pre-ontological. Ultimately, this miss presents the work as a doomed failure and leads to the generation of the work in the form of a failed triad. Therefore, the study can be summarised here in "Uncanny as missed Lack" and "failed triad as a central paradigm for paradoxical conceptual artworks". This paper will focus on the first statement.

In previous studies, the Uncanny has been chiefly positioned as a product of the failure of the mimetic gaze. For example, in Freud's article *The Uncanny*, the Uncanny is situated between the simultaneous semantic intersection of the 'familiar and relevant' and the 'unfamiliar and hidden from sight' (Freud, 1976). In that article, Freud also summarises the basic features of the Uncanny phenomenon in literature, namely the "double" (the resurrection of the dead or dead things to life), the "repetition" (the unconscious compulsion to repress), and the "animistic" (the belief that the world is full of human spirits), and points out that the essence of Uncanny is a conflict of judgement. In Professor Masahiro Mori's article *The Uncanny Valley* (M. Mori, 1970, p.33-35), it is also suggested that when a humanoid robot approaches but fails to achieve a realistic humanoid appearance, a person's reaction to it will suddenly change from sympathy to aversion, This uncomfortable feeling, which arises from the overlap of the familiar and the unfamiliar, is the phenomenon of Uncanny. In the field of art, Mike Kelley and Tate Liverpool co-curated the exhibition *Uncanny* in 2004 (Tate,2004), which also reproduced this phenomenon. Mike Kelley uses a large number of colourful figurative sculptures to explore the conditions and modalities of this perceptual phenomenon. He linked these works to Freud's notion of the double, the disturbingly realistic representation of figures suspended between life and death, evoking the experience of Uncanny through the repressed strangeness of these familiar parts.

The above discourses, which position Uncanny from the perspectives of literature, science and art, all centrally locate the concept in a conflict of empirical judgements. In these contexts, the Uncanny always exists as a mismatch between the symbolic structure presupposed by the subject and the symbolic structure formed by the subject after being disturbed by the conflict of empirical judgment. But there is a problem: it is not enough to locate the Uncanny in dissonance in the realm of experience and consciousness, i.e., a dislocation in the symbolic order. For instance, in Freud's analysis, his orientation towards several features of the Uncanny remains in the ambiguous polysemy and imprecision of human consciousness and the symbolic realm. Although it involves being aware of the unknowable part of the symbolic order, he treats this factor only as a feature of the cause of the phenomenon, not as the essence of it. Similarly, in *Uncanny Valley*, only the dislocation of preconceived cognitive experience from real cognitive experience is discussed, i.e., the

dislocation of the "anthropomorphic appearance of the robot" from the "not-quite-anthropomorphic appearance of the robot". This real cognitive experience does not represent the sensuous perception of real things, of material objects, that is, it describes not the sensuous as Hegel claimed, i.e., as something that is perceived but "still unfamiliar", but rather as the symbolic grasp of the result of such intuitive perception. Thus the Uncanny discussed in Uncanny valley is only a dislocation between the perceived signifying reference and the actual signifying grasp. It still fails to move out of the realm of the perceived, that is, the expected as 'supposedly recognisable as familiar', or the realm of the object's reference in the symbolic order. This is better demonstrated in the art field, where Mike Kelly curates an exhibition that aims to reveal a sense of repressed strangeness through the dissonance of daily realistic figurative images. This sense of strangeness originates from the sensuous, primitive projection of real material things in the human cognitive process. This primordial shadow of material object which not yet be castrated by signifying operation in human's cognitive world, is what Lacan claims to be *das Ding* and is the basis for the operation of Lacan's key term, the Real. It is also the meaning of "truth" in this study. However, while art addresses and presents this field, it fails to enclose it with the tools of language, and it is this regrettable complement that the essay aims to explore.

Therefore, this study claims that the Uncanny reveals a dislocation of judgment. However, this dislocation does not remain in the symbolic order as previous location. Still, it is situated in a dislocation between the symbolic grasp of material things and the intuitive sensory experience of material things. Because the experience in the psychoanalytic sense refers narrowly to the content in the symbolic order, the Uncanny is pre-experiential. It should also be pointed out that the Uncanny is not the essence of this dislocation but rather the representation of it, where the Uncanny is in the same position as the psychoanalytic term *vorstellungrepräsentanz*. The *vorstellungrepräsentanz* refers to the pre-symbolic representation of the empty place of something that disappears, something that is lacking, in the realm of the unconscious. Here, the uncanny is similar to the *vorstellungrepräsentanz* of the empty space, which is to say that the uncanny, as a representation of the gap between the success and the failure of the judgement. It is the structural negation of the symbolic and pre-symbolic affirmation of experience as "having happened", and which therefore transcends the ontological locus of ontology in the form of a 'missed lack'.

Transcending Ontology and the Pre-ontological Positioning of Uncanny

As mentioned, the artwork presents the Uncanny in a gesture transcending ontology. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the enclosure of the parts of the conscious and unconscious that cannot be represented (*das Ding*) reveals an epistemological impotence. It is this impossibility of representation that gives Uncanny the ability to transcend ontology since ontological representation is based on the certainty of "is" and the limits of language, whereas, in psychoanalysis, it is the encirclement of the *das Ding* through a retrospective and limited linguistic or symbolic reference that suggests its place in existence. Because *das Ding* transcends the limits of language and definition, it gives its representation, the Uncanny, a place beyond ontology. Specifically, Uncanny is born out of something unrepresentable, in which the subject builds the symbolic order of consciousness and the representation order of unconscious based on its unrepresentability to conceal its existence, always erupts forth and manifests itself at an inopportune moment. This eruption of the Real threatens the subject's symbolic order because it reveals the illusory essence of the symbolic order by which one understands the world, and the eruption of the Real is the total failure of the signifier's substitutionary role. But simultaneously, this radical failure is also a temptation

that drives the continuing desire to symbolise it. This failure is also the most fundamental coordinate by which the symbolic order was first established to surround it. The eruption brings about unpleasure by destroying the symbolic order because this eruption reveals to the subject the existence of *das Ding*, but the subject cannot find any signifier to refer to *das Ding* that refuses to be symbolized (Slavoj Žižek, 2008, p. 292). But at the same time, it brings great pleasure to the subject because it is the most fundamental lack, which transcends every phenomenal, empirical experience brought about by language and symbols so that it can be the eternal source of the subject's desire, the eternal drive of the subject's desire for the symbolic occupation of it. This pleasure brought about by displeasure is the *Jouissance* of psychoanalysis, the essential characteristic of the Uncanny as a representation: a substitute for the subject's encounter with the dimension of the invisible. It follows that the positioning of the Uncanny cannot simply claim to be what the Uncanny is, since it is nothing in terms of the dimensions of experience and language. What it replaces is the conflict and failure between the original experience derived from external things and people's grasp of this original experience. Hence, Uncanny is beyond ontological definition, the representation of this concept is the same as the representation of the supersensible which it replaces, it is mere enclosures.

Is it possible to use an expression to refer to this substitution and envelopment of Uncanny? One of Lacan's terms is most appropriate here, that of *Tuché*. Uncanny, as a hard kernel of the unsymbolizable that remains in the symbolic world. This hard kernel is described in psychoanalysis as the object of the Real, namely *das Ding*. And this experience of transcending the symbolic order is the subject's reflection on the pre-conscious stage. This difficult reflection, this disruption of a solid symbolic structure, must occur through the subject's encounter, or confrontation, with the Real, that is, through the explosion of the Real. Thus, Uncanny's formulation of the 'return of the subject to the primal confrontation with *das Ding*' is more similar to Lacan's invocation of Aristotle's terminology, *Tuché* (the encounter with the real) (Lacan, 2004, p. 53).

Tuché is an important function of the unconscious, which describes the subject's encounter with the object of the Real in the cognitive process. Here the object of the Real originates from the entity of the objective material world but acquires a paradoxical character when it enters the world of human cognition; on the one hand, Because of its essential richness stemming from materiality it refuses to be fully symbolised, and on the other hand, also in the symbolic order, it plays a structural role through its non-existence. Thus, for the subject's internal epistemic world, the object of the Real is a disembodied thing identified by the subject and functions as a utility. Without a symbolic order, this empty position of the Real cannot be revealed through symbolic failure, but at the same time, it is this empty position that drives the subject to construct the illusion of a symbolic order to conceal its existence. This is the paradoxicality of the Real. *Tuché* primarily describes the former, the point position at which the symbolic order fails because of its encounter with the Real. It is an eruption of Real, contingent encounters that do not obey the causality of the symbolic ordering of the arrangement. It is an encounter that may be missed and the first encounter behind a phantasmagoria (Lacan, 2004, p. 54).

If *Tuché* is the encounter about representation and the Real by the method of perpetual missed in the unconscious, then it could be said that Uncanny, as a representation of this encounter, is revealed as a gesture of missed. It is neither a reality nor an encounter, even nor an experience of an encounter. Uncanny represents the concept of "missed encounter", the "slipping" of a leftover lack from sight during the encounter. The 'miss' here is a structural

miss, acting not only on the conscious but also on the unconscious. Lacan gives a very apt example here (Lacan, 2004, p. 56):

"I was awakened from a short nap by a knock on the door, and with the impatient knock, I formed a dream that showed me something different from the knock. When I woke up, I reconstructed my whole representation around this knocking, and then I realised that the knocking was not in my perception but my consciousness. I know I am waking up, that I am knocked up."

Between dreaming and waking, the revelation of the Real appears both before the beginning of my dream representation, evoking the *vorstellungrepräsentanz* constructing a metonymic representation, and at the same time at the moment before I wake up and begin to construct my symbolic order. The knocking in reality is the object of the Real, first of all, it exists exactly as a materiality in the reality, but in the cognitive process of the subject, it exists only as its effectiveness, but not as a point of its entity. Whether in the unconscious or conscious stage, the object of the Real, the knock, exists only as a precondition in the structure and as a foreign object that the structure cannot assimilate. In other words, the knock is a determining factor that plays an important role in the subject's cognitive world. However, simultaneously, both due to its unsignifiable character and due to its residue of becoming a signifying operation that cannot be ignored, this nature leads to its appearance in the subject's unconscious and conscious mind only in the form of a dislocation of its ontological positioning, i.e., it is positioned as a determined lack. Thus, the knocking is opaque to the dreamer, both consciously and unconsciously. On the one hand, in the unconscious, it only provides a starting point for the dream's metonymy of the knocking on the door of reality, i.e., it makes the metonymy of the incomprehensible reality a representation of the absence of meaning, i.e., the *vorstellungrepräsentanz*. On the other hand, in the realm of consciousness, it is through the influence of this thing that has already occurred in the past, i.e., after I have been awakened, that the symbolic order is constructed around the fact of "being awakened" and incorporates the signifier of the "I" into this order. I woke up first and then realized what had woken "I" up.

It can be seen that the common cause of the Uncanny's functioning in both the unconscious and conscious phases is twofold: On the one hand, there is the paradoxicality of the object of the Real, i.e., as a structural void that serves a precise function. On the other hand, there is how the subject perceives the object of the Real, i.e., *Tuché*, or the encounter with the object of the Real in its pre-ontological position as "missed." However, it should be clarified that there are specific differences in how this encounter of missed works at the unconscious and conscious levels. In terms of the content of missed, at the unconscious level the subject misses the absence behind the metaphorical representation of the dream, which is the drive of representation in the unconscious. At the conscious level, the subject misses the absence behind the symbolic structure that constructs reality as the basis. This lack is both the driver of construction and simultaneously the fact that the constructed symbolic structure wishes to conceal, that is, the purpose of its construction. This missing makes the Uncanny incapable of being grasped simply in terms of an ontological assertion; its paradoxicality takes it beyond the limits of ontology, and for the subject, the thinking of this transcendence needs to be achieved by retrospection.

Uncanny and Aporia

Uncanny's question is formally similar to aporia, even if they are far apart in their textual meanings. Uncanny refers to a doomed miss where the real meets the symbolic/representational, whereas aporia in Derrida's text refers to a pervasive flaw, dilemma, or paradox. It is a paradoxical idea conveyed negatively in a linguistic, philosophical text due to the boundaries of thought and the limits of language. It is a category in which thinking can no longer find a clear passage and puts thinking in a dilemma with no way out (Derrida, 1993, p. 15-19). However, apart from the meaning of the text, both achieve an ontological leap in the same way. They both disrupt the positioning of the "exact" using the paradoxicality of their logical structure, and their contradictory connotations keep them in a semantic space of unrecognisability, i.e., in a state of uncertainty. Uncanny, with the aforementioned essential "encounter with the object of the Real," is stuck between empirical representations and non-empirical representational failures. The aporia is situated between language and language, between concepts and concepts, between the boundaries of different ontologies, or between the boundaries of truth, it is "not knowing where to go (Derrida, 1993, p. 12)" that exists after the end of truth, the end of the description, the end of concepts. Aporia repeats itself, splits itself, contradicts itself, and shifts contradictions from one place to another by opening up an endless experience (Derrida, 1993, p. 16). It achieves an equally dynamic transcending of the boundaries of definition by depriving thinking of a determinate path (Derrida, 1993, p. 23). In this regard, Heidegger provides an apt example in *Being and Time*, that is how the contemplation (mourning) of "death" in fact transcends the boundaries of language and sameness, that is, the boundaries of the present round (Derrida, 1993, p. 23). For Heidegger points out that for Dasein's death, it is not any mortal death, nor any conceptual or material death, it is "the possibility of the pure and simple impossibility for Dasein ". Thus it is both absolutely replaceable and yet absolutely unique (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 250 cited by Derrida, 1993, p. 23).

Both Uncanny and Aporia interrogate presupposed existence outside the boundaries of discursive/symbolic and identity/ontological categories, although the difference is that the presupposition that Aporia interrogates is a non-passage, a chaotic infinity of possibilities revealed by language to which no identity is assigned in Derrida's theory. Yet the presupposed object of Uncanny's questioning, although also outside the boundaries of representation and sameness, is the chaos between the representable and the unrepresentable that is revealed by psychoanalysis, the pure negativity the Real brings. This pure negativity exerts its structural efficacy differently in the symbolic ordering phase of consciousness and the metonymic phase of unconscious representation.

In the structure of the unconscious, or in the context of dream, when the knocking occurs, a metaphor for the "disturbance" that has already occurred from the object of the Real, i.e., the dream representation, is generated. Meanwhile, the noise of the knocking as the material object has retreated quietly behind these representations. In the unconscious, people cannot directly recognise the Real that evokes alternative representations and metonymy, because in the dream one does not have an essentially negative subjectivity. As Descartes's "I think" suggests, Descartes clarifies the "I think" in the "I doubt" (Lacan, 2004, p. 44). The reason why 'I doubt' can be created is that what constitutes the subject is not only the illusion of the subject's symbolic grasp of the self but also the Real, which refuses to be grasped. The subject's certainty of self-existence is confirmed by cross-checking the signifier of the self with the Real (Lacan, 2004, p. 45), and this confirmation basis on the refuse-symbolised part of the subject's interior, that is, the intersubjective Other or the *das Ding* that Lacan defines as

extime (Žižek, S., 2008, p. 204). This cross-confirmation, or "I doubt", is driven by the essential negativity of the Real that refuses to be grasped. Because of this cross-affirmation, the subject can escape the danger of falling entirely into the symbolic illusion. Thus, in reality, the subject can determine his subjectivity through this reflection. But this reflection is impossible in the unconscious stage because, in reality, one's the sensuous is separated from the perceived. This separation ensures the viability of cross-confirmation; however, in unconscious dreams, there is no the sensuous; the unconscious realm is composed entirely of metonymically generated representations of the object of the Real (Lacan, 2004, p.48). One can talk to oneself in a dream and tell oneself that it is a dream, but one can no longer realise that one is talking to oneself in a dream and understand oneself as a self-talking person (Lacan, 2004, p. 75). That is why, in the unconscious, the subject is the subject without negativity which deriving from its own materiality. The subject is the representation, the *vorstellungrepräsentanz*, which conceals the root of that dream that cannot be recognised. Therefore, in the dream, the subject cannot return to the lack concealed by the *vorstellungrepräsentanz*. It is only when I wake up from the dream, through the discrepancy between the sensuous of the return due to the intervention of material reality and the perceived brought about by the dream, that I can realise that there is some source of the representation of the dream, or that I presuppose the origin of the resulting dream, but that the object of the Real, which has created that source, has been missed. I can only retrospectively presuppose the location where this knocking occurs through the efficacy of that which is lost, that is, the impact of the knocking that has long since ended. At the moment of awakening, at the moment of the subject's encounter with the Real, the experience of dismay at the moment when the representational phantasm of the dream is in complete rout is the manifestation of Uncanny's functioning in the phase of the unconscious. The retracing of the position of what has happened in hindsight can be understood as a miss in terms of the positioning of Uncanny, thus giving Uncanny a pre-ontological position.

On the other hand, the conscious perspective, the Uncanny can likewise only be recognised in a missed way. Unlike the unconscious, where the unconscious misses the Uncanny because the subject does not a basis for reflection—subjectivity and therefore can only retrospectively search for the position where the dream began at the moment of awakening. However, in the conscious stage, the Uncanny is missed primarily because the encounter with the Real is the original driver for the subject's construction of the symbolic order used to grasp it. The subject has to draw on this order again to understand this encounter, so the subject can only retrospectively search for the location after it has completed the construction and identify what it seems to find as the result that justifies its presuppositions. So if Uncanny is missed in the unconscious stage because it is merely the cause of the unconscious, it is missed in the conscious stage because it is not only the cause but also the result. Specifically, the moment I awoke, I constructed my entire symbolic system around the knocking that had disappeared (Lacan, 2004, p. 56). I realized I was here, when I went to sleep and why I awoke, and then I understood there was a knock on the door. The noise in my sensuous is organised in my consciousness as a signifier that can be understood as "knocking". I can grasp a signified, which has disappeared, merely using its signifier, and can only grasp its existence by constructing a presupposition of its existence through the effect for me and grasping its existence by the symbolic order built on the presupposition of its existence. This is a paradoxical self-reference and the paradoxicality of Uncanny. In the consciousness, I organise a symbolic network of relations centred on the signifier of "I" by identifying the position of "I", and use this network to understand the causes and consequences. This "I" signifier-centred network is based on the absolute negativity of the encounter with the Real, that is, the ungraspable noise wakes me up, and I must first ask myself "what I am" before I

can realise that "I am the 'I' which was woken up by the noise" (Lacan, 2004, p. 56), and then I will realise that "when I went to sleep and when I was woken up". Through my material character, i.e., my part in the realm of the Real and my reappropriation of the signifier of the "I" in the symbolic order, the symbolic order that I reconstruct on this basis, on the one hand, obscures the source of the construction that manifests itself as Lack (the encounter with the Real), and on the other hand, provides the causal support for this source. Upon waking up, I first construct the symbolic order and locate the signifier of "I", then retrospectively identify the *Tuché* that woke me up as the "knocking". This is what Lacan means: "I know I am waking up, that I am knocked up." (Lacan, 2004, p. 56). The establishment of the symbolic order is driven by and based on this "knock" presented as a structural void and the impossibility of understanding. Therefore, the "knocking" as an object of the Real is destined to be missed; there is no place for it in the symbolic order, but only for it as a premise and purpose. It can be seen that the essence of Uncanny is, on the one hand, the cause of thinking about it and, on the other hand, the result of thinking about it. Thus, Uncanny can only be grasped in the stage of consciousness by missing and retracing, which justifies its pre-ontological position.

Conclusion

The article mainly elaborates on the premise "Uncanny as missed lack" of the research theme "Failed triad as a paradoxical conceptual art paradigm", the main idea is to clarify the pre-ontological position of the Uncanny. Uncanny, as a paradoxical phenomenon, is essentially an alternative representation of human confrontation with *das Ding*, i.e., the representation of *Tuché*. The traumatic nature of this encounter stems from the materiality and richness of the Real, which refuses to be grasped by the symbolic order and eventually becomes an eternal Lack of the subject's cognition. The Real, presented as a Lack, is also paradoxical because it plays a structural causal role in its Lack. The subject constructs the symbolic order of consciousness and the metaphorical representation of the unconscious based on the Lack of the Real, and this Lack becomes the original driver and coordinates for the cognitive world. However, the subject's attempt to grasp this identity of the Real, that is, to locate it in an ontological perspective, is doomed to failure. This is because, on the one hand, from the unconscious perspective, the Real is the cause of the representation since the subject can only stay in the representation and lacks sensual cognition of the Real. Thus, the subject cannot determine his subjectivity through "I think" and hence cannot grasp the source of the representation. In the unconscious, the subject is the representation and, therefore, cannot reflect on the cause of the representation, i.e., cannot directly grasp the identity of the Real. On the other hand, in consciousness, the symbolic order constructed by the subject is based on the anti-symbolic of the Real, but simultaneously, the subject's purpose in constructing the symbolic order is to grasp the Real symbolically. Thus, the ungraspability of the Real ensures the subject's desire for its continued symbolic grasp, and the only way to determine its position is through the order constructed by the subject's desire for its symbolic grasp. So the attempted ontological grasp of the Real in consciousness is also doomed to failure. As a result of these two confirmations, the Real can only be identified as a pre-determined logical structural point position, a pre-ontological position by retrospection, which thus proves to be at the heart of the conceptual artwork: the Uncanny as missed Lack.

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