

172546

Lit 112.1

Dr. Joyce Martin

December 9, 2019

The Emergence of the Uncanny from Mimesis in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*

There is a terrifying dimension present in imitation. When walking in a dark night and passing by a tree with branches resembling human limbs, a rattling fear may arise. In Black Mirror episode, *Be Right Back*, a dead husband is re-animated in flesh and bones, and, rather than comforting the widow left behind, it instead arouses dread and anger in her. In these examples, we are guided to understand that this evoked terror may actually usher in the direction of *the uncanny*.

What defines a feeling of terror as uncanny? Freud would argue in his essay on "The Uncanny" that the uncanny or *unheimlich* does not stray too far away from the core feeling ascribed in *heimlich*, a term associated with words such as homely and comfort (917). There is a deemed familiarity assimilated in *unheimlich*, and this is precisely what makes it horror-inducing; the estrangement of an object that was once recognized in the mind as homely, comforting, and familiar.

A special form of imitating the familiar must be delivered in order for *unheimlich* to occur. In literature, imitation is better termed and recognized as Mimesis. Mimesis functions as a means in which poetry molds its own versions of the world through imitation (Princeton Encyclopedia, 884). It is creative imitation that has the ability to reshape realities. Mimesis, then as a special kind of imitation, may potentially become an instrument to evoke the uncanny. The Broadway *Cats*, as a show

packed with “dozens of nimble furrries, paws ailing, dancing delightfully in unison and belting out Lloyd Webber’s pop-infused show tunes” (Zara) may actually demonstrate this notion.

In using human actors as vessels to embody cat characters, *Cats* delivers a compelling performance of feline mimesis and evokes feelings of dread and uneasiness that emerges from distorting familiar life forms, therefore categorizing itself as a case of uncanny as theorized by Freud.

Cats, a collaboration of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical prowess and T.S. Eliot’s written collection, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, has made its way to become one of Broadway’s longest-running hits (Zara). But like any classic, it has long survived not only because of its glamour, but also for its critics.

Most critics would argue that *Cats* is rather eerie and disturbing, even giving it the label of a ‘demented dream ballet’. Lodge attempts at rationalizing this by explaining that the proportion of cat to human in the cats in *Cats* is difficult to pin down, which is, hence, what constitutes it as ‘creepy’ to some audiences. The obscurity of these proportions suggests that there must be demarcations differentiating cat and human beings. Certain behaviors are attributed solely to cats and humans separately and a sense of mutual exclusivity between the two objects is preconceived in the mind.

Cats have elongated movements, curling tails, and elegant postures. They make hisses, purrs, and meows to express moods and communicate. These are not intrinsic nor natural behaviors in human beings. In *Cats*, however, the synthesis of cat behaviors and human actions is seamless, and the product is a dreadful mix of cat-humans described as having:

Distinctly human facial features crowned by jaunty cat ears, dancing human limbs (...) and snaking tails. Vivid but not tactile, they’re at first glance neither fish nor fowl, let

alone feline. Indeed, they look no more persuasively cat-like than the elaborately face-painted stars of the stage show, however much more state-of-the-art their unsettling furry disguise (Lodge)

Plenty of the scrutiny received by the Broadway is centered on the amalgamated object, the cat-human. The unsettled feeling arising from the combination of the two mutually exclusive objects, cat and human, actually prove Freud's first argument on the uncanny:

It ['the uncanny'] is undoubtedly related to what is frightening--to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general (...) a class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar (930).

The audience as people, and others, even cat owners, are assumed to have the ability to distinguish what cats are, what humans are not, and vice versa. On the premise of this, the dread that is to come from watching *Cats* is already dismissed as an abstract idea which proves the previously mentioned Freudian claim on 'the uncanny' or *unheimlich* as having a core feeling ascribed in its counterpart, *heimlich* or homely and familiar. His rebuttal of Jentsch's claim then of *unheimlich* merely being the unfamiliar (931) is affirmed by the fact that the source of *unheimlich* is not an abstract idea. When an actor clad in striped bodysuits is painted with flashy eyeshadows and whiskers, and makes hissing sounds with hands formed in claws, an alien behavior carries out from the familiar guise of a human being in his imitation of a cat and the two become synthesized. Human beings and cats, as familiar objects, defamiliarize each other simultaneously in the process. There is a mismatch of attributes that enhances this experience. Human facial expressions, features, and

emotions become appropriated as cat-like. The strange dichotomy in this performance can become cognitively confusing, and consequently unsettling, which then meets another criteria of Freud's argument on 'the uncanny'.

Freud cites Jentsch in his essay to explain where the uncanny may originate from. He [Jentsch] "ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncaniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in" (931). The intellectual uncertainty that Jentsch explains may pertain to the previously mentioned cognitive confusion. Our minds qualify something as familiar when we see them consistently stay within conditions we have boxed them in and deems them familiar. The moment that it negates these conditions, the familiar object then becomes unfamiliar, inciting intellectual uncertainty and leaving its witnesses cognitively confused (The Psychology of the Uncanny).

In *Cats*, because the spectator is unable to categorize an action as either cat or human, he is now left to grapple with a certain ambiguity. According to uncanny valley researcher, McAndrew, the feeling of being 'creeped out' is "an evolved adaptive emotional response to ambiguity about the presence of threat that enables us to maintain vigilance during times of uncertainty" (Tayag). What makes *Cats* most especially unsettling is the fact that the ambiguity permeates every aspect of the show.

In Freud's essay, he uses the example of a doll closing its eyes as a form of uncanny (917). If a still object mimicking a simple human ability can immediately fall under the uncanny, what more if such mimicry were sustained? In *Cats*, an element of continuous movement gives it a greater stimulation of 'the uncanny'. The actors combining catlike slinking and leaping with upright human walking, dancing, and hugging allows "the uncanny to come at us from several directions at once" (Tayag).

Mimesis truly is a powerful tool in evoking the uncanny. Although intensities may range and reception is subjective, *Cats* has proven itself to be a grand form of the uncanny. It is no wonder that the Broadway has seated itself as a classic. It continues to survive itself as critics and fans long argue on the bewilderment it exudes. Polarized feelings of amusement and discomfort is elicited out of its audiences for the very reason that marks it under 'the uncanny': the impeccable performance of cat imitation.

Word Count: 1,235 words

Agama, Zofia Lyne R.

Works Cited

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *The Norton Anthology of Theory of Criticism*.

Trans. D. A. Russell. Ed. Vincent Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001, p. ()

Lodge, Guy. "Litter-ally terrifying: is Cats the creepiest film of the year?."

The Guardian. 19 July 2019. www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/18/

litter-ally-terrifying-Is-cats-the-creepiest-film-of-the-year. Accessed 8

Dec. 2019.

"Mimesis." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Greene,

Roland. 4th ed., Princeton UP, 2012, p. 884.

Tayag, Yasmin. "Uncanny Valley Researchers Pinpoint What Makes the 'Cats' Trailer

So Creepy." *Inverse*. 19 Jul. 2019. www.inverse.com/article/57870-

Cats-trailer-filmed-in-the-uncanny-valley. Accessed 7 Dec. 2019

"The Psychology of the Uncanny." *Youtube*, uploaded by Xelasoma, 6 Nov. 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsHkssV4cvQ>.

Zara, Christopher. "Cats' Broadway Review: Where Hell Hath No Furry; Andrew

Lloyd Webber's 'Cats' Returns to Broadway after 16 Years, Proving Once Again

Why It's a Cultural Milestone--and a Punch Line." *Newsweek*, no. 7, 2016.

EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbro&AN=

edsbro.A461039353& scope=site.