

# CLÉMENT CHÉROUX

## THAT WHICH DISTURBS

### THE UNQUIET IMAGES

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#### **That which disturbs**

**On the Utility of Illusions** — It is a well-known fact: at the Grévin Wax Museum, the visitor is immersed in darkness, which enhances the resemblance between the figures and their models, and creates an atmosphere of mystery. Halfway through, the curious visitor generally sits down on a bench, without really noticing it is already being used by a dozing man. Engrossed by observing other visitors, he is gradually beset by an unpleasant feeling. Something is not exactly right. The person sitting next to him is too still to be real. He shudders as he more closely examines the complexion of the face, clearly made of nothing but wax. A few rooms further, the circuit has the exact opposite artifice in store. The visitor proceeds into the middle of an assembly he believes consists entirely of wax statues. Just as he is passing through, an actor disguised as a café waiter, with a towel on his forearm and his face heavily made-up to produce a wax-like effect, begins to move about jerkily, like an automaton. This time the visitor is startled, and understands that the very dark lighting is not simply to ensure resemblance, or to create a mysterious atmosphere, but to help make the wax figures and humans indistinguishable. André Breton recounted how he had been similarly moved before the “adorable wax-work figure in the Musée Grévin... [of] a woman fastening her garter in the shadows, and is the only statue I know of with eyes, the eyes of provocation.”<sup>1</sup> Breton was entirely correct in locating the provocation at the level of the eyes. It is the scopic drive, the desire to see or to pierce the darkness of the gallery, which immerses him in that strange state of indetermination, in which it is impossible to decide, at least for a brief moment, whether he has before him a wax figure, or a woman in the flesh. It is indeed in the gaze that the malaise of indecision is born. But it lingers on more deeply in the psyche. In a 1906 essay,

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<sup>1</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, Grove Press, 1960 [1928], 152. Emphasis mine.

the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch explored this “unpleasant impression... that readily arises in many people when they visit collections of wax figures... In semi-darkness it is often especially difficult to distinguish a life-size wax or similar figure from a human person.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to specify that “for many sensitive souls, such a figure also has the ability to retain its unpleasantness after the individual has taken a decision as to whether it is animate or not.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond the emotion of their discovery, these “adorable figures,” to use Breton’s phrase, serve to trigger a more persistent form of anxiety.

**Translator’s Note** – There is a German word that is capable of quite faithfully describing this inquiétude: Unheimliche. It was analyzed in 1906 by Jentsch, in the text we just cited, before being more broadly popularized with publication in 1919 of Sigmund Freud’s essay, “Das Unheimliche”, in the review *Imago*.<sup>4</sup> The term is formed from the root heim (“home”), which we find in the words Daheim (“at home”) or Heimat (“homeland”). Heimlich can generally be translated as “familiar,” but is preceded by a prefix of negation. Unheimliche thus describes a divergence from what is usually experienced as familiar, everyday and reassuring. Although in a lesser category than anxiety, it is indeed an unpleasant kind of emotional experience. For Freud, Unheimliche “is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”<sup>5</sup> In 1933, in the first edition of Freud’s text in French, Marie Bonaparte and Mrs. Édouard Marty suggested translating the term as “disturbing strangeness.”<sup>6</sup> In a footnote, they nevertheless take care to specify that “it seemed impossible for us to find a better translation of this German term, that in reality is untranslatable in French. The two-word term we ultimately chose, after much hesitation, at least seems to us to have the merit of rendering the two principal concepts contained in the German term (translator’s note).”<sup>7</sup> Although poetically original, the French translation of the word is not, in fact, very satisfactory with regard to the meaning. It retains none of the original word’s familiarity, nor its negation. It forgets the cause of Unheimliche, in the end retaining only the effect of disturbing strangeness. Where the German word, in a fine tension between opposites, disturbs by interrupting

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2:1, 1995, 7-16, 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jentsch, “On the Psychology;” Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Books, 2003, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Books, 2003, 124. Unless otherwise noted, we are referencing this translation.

<sup>6</sup> Translator’s note: the French translation for Unheimliche (“the uncanny”) is “disturbing strangeness.” As the ensuing paragraph takes up the limitations of this specific translation, we have translated the French term into English, rather than use the English translation of unheimliche (“the uncanny”).

<sup>7</sup> Freud, *L’Inquiétante étrangeté*, trans. Marie Bonaparte and Mme Édouard Marty, Gallimard, 1933, note 2 (our translation).

the familiar, the French term is simply content to intensify the strangeness. It is redundant, and fails to translate the dialectical complexity of the notion. Numerous translators have attempted to replace it with “disturbing familiarity,” “strange familiar,” or “non-familiar.”<sup>8</sup> The most recent French translation of Freud’s text, by Olivier Mannoni in 2011, is incidentally entitled *L’Inquiétant Familier* [The Disturbing Familiar].<sup>9</sup> But it is certainly too late. The French translation from the 1930s, even if imprecise, has imposed itself in common parlance. Any attempt at amendment henceforth seems pointless. New suggestions have a strange ring to them, and do not seem to be charged with the same meaning as the nevertheless erroneous translation. By habit and convenience, we will therefore conserve disturbing strangeness here.

**The Indecision of the Gaze** – To analyze the uncanny, Freud used one of the most famous fantastic tales of German Romanticism, *Der Sandmann* [The Sandman] by Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, he maintained continuity with Jentsch, who also relied on Hoffmann’s short story in his essay. For Jentsch, as for Freud, one of the primary disturbing themes of the tale was embodied in the daughter of the physician Spalanzani, Olimpia, with whom the main character, Nathanael, has fallen in love by observing through the magnifying lens of a pocket-telescope. “A tall, very slim woman, beautifully proportioned and magnificently dressed, was sitting in front of a small table on which she was leaning, with her hands folded. She was facing the door, so that I had a full view of her angelic face. She seemed not to notice me, and indeed there was something lifeless about her eyes, as though they lacked the power of sight; she seemed to be asleep with her eyes open. I had a rather uncanny feeling...”<sup>11</sup> In reality, the beautiful Olimpia is no more than an automaton fabricated by Spalanzani with the complicity of the alchemist Coppelius, the Sandman, who was also behind the death of Nathanael’s father. For Jentsch, this is a fine example of *Unheimliche*. “Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate— and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> Wax figures, the most elaborate automata, or human-sized

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. François Stirn, *L’Inquiétante étrangeté, Freud [The Uncanny, Freud], Profil Philosophie, Hatier, 1987.*

<sup>9</sup> Freud, *L’Inquiétant familier [The Disturbing Familiar], Petite Bibliothèque Payot, new translation by Olivier Mannoni, Payot, 2011, 31-32.*

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, “The Sandman,” *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, trans. Ritchie Robertson, Oxford World’s Classics, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>12</sup> Jentsch, “On the Psychology,” *op. cit.*, 11.

dolls are, almost naturally, excellent sources of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> Elaborating upon this example, Jentsch and Freud deduce that any state of undecidability is also a potential catalyst for the uncanny. “For him [Jentsch] the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty,”<sup>14</sup> writes Freud in taking up Jentsch’s argument. Inquiétude is indeed the experience of an indecision of judgment, in which it becomes impossible to decide if a thing is lifeless or alive, inanimate or animate, real or fantasy.

**The Tradition of Inquiétude** — Freud’s text on the uncanny is, along with his essays on Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, one of his most important contributions to aesthetic theory. And with good cause: for over three centuries now, this tradition of inquiétude in the West has been, with more or less intensity according to the time and place, one of the most common emotional mainsprings employed in art and literature. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Romanticism overindulged in it. The crepuscular creatures that haunt the paintings of Johann Heinrich Füssli or Francisco de Goya, the lyrical flights of compositions by Richard Wagner or Hector Berlioz, the tormented atmosphere of the tales by Achim von Arnim or Hoffmann, have no other purpose than to help strangeness burst forth into the everyday order. During the twentieth century, the feeling of the uncanny returned in force immediately after the First World War. It is not a coincidence that Freud published his text precisely in 1919. During the entire interwar period, against a backdrop of permanent political and social crisis, this burning anxiety fed off the conflict’s horror, as well as the intuition of its possible return. It spread through Expressionist Cinema, Poetic Realism, the New Objectivity and even Surrealism. It can be seen in the atmosphere of films by Fritz Lang or Marcel Carné, or the impression made by paintings by Otto Dix or Christian Schad, the mood of paintings by Giorgio di Chirico, or the strange doll fashioned by Hans Bellmer. This is what Pierre Mac Orlan—in a will to synthesize that surpassed artistic disciplines or national trends—described in the mid-1920s as the “social fantastic.”<sup>15</sup> It was embodied in a number of characteristic figures, such as the demobilized soldier, the murderer tormented by his conscience, or the prostitute. It preferred locales such as sprawling cities, train stations or dark alleyways. It fed on human misery, hunger, guilt and malaise. It is this latent feeling of inquiétude that insidiously corrupted the atmosphere of interwar Europe, and which oozes from every type of creation. This form of anxiety reappeared in contemporary creation during the 1980s, through works from artists as different as Mike Kelley, Paul

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Pia Müller-Tamm and Katharina Sykora (ed.), *Puppen, Körper, Automaten, Phantasmen Der Moderne, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen*, 1999; Jane Munro (ed.), *Mannequin d’artiste, mannequin fétiche*, Éditions Paris Musées, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, *op. cit.*, 125.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pierre Mac Orlan, “Images du fantastique social”, *Les Cahiers de Pierre Mac Orlan*, no. 13 (Musée des Pays de Seine-et-Marne/ Association des amis de Pierre Mac Orlan, 2000); Clément Chéroux, “Pourtant Mac Orlan,” in *Mac Orlan, Écrits sur la photographie*, Textuel, 2011, 6-27; Roger W. Baines, “Inquiétude” in *the Work of Pierre Mac Orlan*, Rodopi Bv Editions, 2000.

McCarthy, Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Laurie Simmons, and Tony Oursler, or in the films of David Lynch, David Cronenberg, or Joel and Ethan Coen. The ubiquity of subjects such as mannequins, masks, or twinning clearly does not make romantics or belated surrealists of them, but rather bears witness to the timeless nature of the uncanny.

**On the Verge of the Oxymoron** – This discreet anxiety is undeniably present in the work of Valérie Belin. Since the early 1990s, the majority of the subjects she has explored fall fully within the tradition of inquiétude: the mirrors to which she devoted two series in 1997 (“Venice I” and “Venice II”), as well as the masks to which she returned in 1998 (“Robots”) and 2004 (“Masks”). We should also mention the theme of the carcass or remains, which cut across a number of series, from dresses (“Dresses”) in 1996, to safes (“Safes”) in 2005 and cars (“Cars”) in 1998. This strange feeling of a container emptied of its human content continued through the series devoted to interiors (“Interiors”) in 2012, and to cabaret scenes (“Stage Sets”) in 2011. However, the theme most recurrently linked to the uncanny in Belin’s work is undoubtedly that of the mannequin. If we consider the semantic opening of this word which, in French, designates both a mannequin for a shop window and a model in a fashion show— what English speakers distinguish via “dummy” and “model”—there are no less than seven series that explore this subject: “Models I” (2001), “Mannequins” (2003), “Models II” (2006), “Black Women II” (2006), “Crowned Heads” (2009), “Black Eyed Susan I” (2010), “Black Eyed Susan II” (2013). Belin also returned to this theme in her most recent series, “Super Models,” shown for the first time in the current exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Aside from these subjects clearly linked to the world of inquiétude, what especially interests Belin are states of incertitude characteristic of unheimliche. In most of her series involving a human representation, the viewer cannot help but wonder whether he is facing a real person or a manufactured figure. This is particularly the case with her “Michael Jackson” series: are they authentic lookalikes, or part of a photographic collection including all of the wax statues, some more similar than others, from every Grévin and Tussauds museum around the world? The artist enjoys nurturing this ambiguity. In her work, everything seems to be in place to reify the human: the particular complexion of “Models II” or “Black Women II” transforms them into wax figures; the cut of the shoulders in “Black Women I” increases their resemblance to statues; the tunics wound around Moroccan brides (“Moroccan Brides”) finish dehumanizing them. On the other hand, everything is done to reanimate the inanimate: light shimmers in the crystal of the first series (“Crystal I” and “Crystal II”), the chiselled lighting of the motors (“Engines”) makes us imagine they are about to rev; the light trembling of crowned heads (“Crowned Heads”) seems to give life back to them. Since her beginnings, Belin’s work has always been shot through with powerful dialectical tensions. It is constructed around opposing pairs: body or object, static and dynamic, natural or artificial, etc. It is because she enjoys situations of

indecision that she is so interested in transitory states: the rite of passage which marriage represents in Moroccan culture ("Moroccan Brides"), the construction of a dream body by bodybuilders ("Bodybuilders I" and "Bodybuilders II"), or the sex change for transgender people ("Transsexuals"). The discourse surrounding her work incidentally seems marked by apparently contradictory assessments: her approach is seemingly both documentary and visual, her images both flat and sculptural, her oeuvre pertaining as much to minimalist rigor as to baroque proliferation. Moreover, she herself likes to use paradoxical expressions, such as "dark clarity" or "perfect imperfection."<sup>16</sup> She has a genuine culture of the oxymoron that is particularly favourable to the emergence of the uncanny.<sup>17</sup>

**The Motion Blurred Picture** – This culture of the oxymoron translates into the very structure of Belin's work. The feeling of strangeness that emanates from it is the result of a fairly systematic tension between subjects belonging to an everyday environment, and a manner of treating them that makes them disturbing. Most of the recurring themes in the artist's work are in fact linked to popular culture and, consequently, to a world familiar to a very large audience: from Michael Jackson to bags of potato chips, carnival masks, beauty queens, magicians and Lido dancers. When the objects are not decontextualized on a monochrome background, they are represented, like the young women in the series "Brides," in front of the window displays of fast food restaurants or sex shops. Belin is undeniably one of those artists who are not afraid to contend with the triviality of the everyday. If her subjects belong to an ordinary environment, their treatment on the other hand markedly distances them from it. This was rather restrained in her early series, except through use of point of view, framing, or somewhat unnatural lighting ("Crystal I", "Crystal II", "Silver", "Dresses", "Venice I", "Venice II"). The smooth skin of models ("Models II") or métisses ("Black Women II"), or the over-brightness of the bodies of bodybuilders ("Bodybuilders I" and "Bodybuilders II"), also take part in this discreet effect of defamiliarization. In fact, until 2006, the primary difference that Belin imposed on her typical subjects was photographic treatment in black and white. Since 2008, she has more conspicuously used the entire range of techniques invented by the avant-garde photographers of the 1920s and 1930s, and which the coming of the digital age has permitted reintroducing in contemporary practices. This includes, for example, solarization in the series "Interiors" and "Still Life," or overexposure in "Black Eyed Susan," "Brides," and "Bob." It is also present in use of the wide-angle in "Vintage Cars," or what laboratory jargon refers to as the bas-relief effect in "Crowned Heads." As

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<sup>16</sup> **Conversations with Valérie Belin.**

<sup>17</sup> **Cf. Javier San Martín, "Beltza," in Valérie Belin, Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, 2003.**

Belin herself explains about superimposition, “I use these techniques to make viewing the image more complex, more disturbing, less immediate, less evident, less univocal.”<sup>18</sup> In the end, the principles here are rather similar to Bertold Brecht’s distanciation, or Siegfried Kracauer’s estrangement.<sup>19</sup> To describe this process, Belin has on multiple occasions used the expression “motion blur effect.”<sup>20</sup> Etymologically, it is the very meaning of in-quiétude to describe a state unfavorable toward rest. The techniques rehabilitated by the artist finally have no other function than to expel the reassuring immobility of the familiar from the photograph. They disturb, agitate and disrupt the images. They disquiet them. They disturb them, in the original sense of the word.

**A Critique of Alter-Utopia** – The uncanny summoned by Valérie Belin is obviously not of the same nature as that of Romanticism or the social fantastic. The inquiétude of the romantics flourishes primarily in the countryside, along sunken roads, or in dark forests. It is provoked by the unexpected appearance, in a calm and quiet everyday setting, of droves of fantastic creatures: witches, vampires, golems, necromancers, lycanthropes, ankou and other demons. The anxiety distilled by the social fantastic is more urban than rural. It haunts the city at night. Its terrain of choice is a dark street barely touched by the wan light of desolate lampposts, the echo of steps rushing on cobblestone, and furtive shadows stretching on dilapidated walls. The fantastic of the interwar period is rarely supernatural, it is entirely realist. It is a social fantastic in the sense that it feeds off of the inquiétudes of modern society. “The fantastic of the romantics,” explained Mac Orlan, “appears very puerile to us. Their characters are not human enough... The devil is not terrifying enough on the heath of Siboro, among the witches, but he can be while appearing in a small cabaret in a rough neighbourhood, whose owner, for example, repairs bicycles.”<sup>21</sup> The uncanny at work in Valérie Belin’s work is of a totally different nature. It resides neither in the imagination, nor in reality, but inhabits the world of images in the postmodern moment. Its locale of predilection is the stereotype. In fact, since the 1990s, Belin has not stopped exploring the clichés of appearance. The society of hyper consumption in which we live strives to sell us a “desire for change,” which in fact simply makes us conform with the canons of traditional Western culture: to become white when we are black, to be perfectly smooth, look strong, keep one’s pose, resemble a magazine image, and so forth. Ultra-capitalism engenders what can only be called an alter utopia: the fantasy of being another. A large part of

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<sup>18</sup> Valérie Belin, “Disturbing Familiarity,” interview with Roxana Marcoci, in the present volume, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bertold Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, Methuen, 1964, 179–205; Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Oxford University Press, 1969; Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, Verso, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> *Conversations with Valérie Belin*.

<sup>21</sup> Mac Orlan, “Le Fantastique,” 163.

Valérie Belin's work is an insidious critique of this mercenary illusion. Through her effects of motion blur, the artist alters the model. She places the image at a distance, and thus brings forth the false, vain, grotesque or morbid aspects it can contain. It is precisely that which disturbs.

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