

Kanye West and the Uncanny: Eerie and Familiar Associations in “Fade” and “Famous”

Nathan Fleshner
University of Tennessee, USA

Kanye West’s support for Donald Trump has reintroduced some questions, both peculiar and familiar, from a multitude of past public declarations and controversies. West’s recent political diatribes include well-documented meetings with Donald Trump, frequent wearing of a “Make America Great Again” hat, an at-best uncomfortable televised rant after a performance on *Saturday Night Live*, and comments Elias Leight described in *Rolling Stone* as “flippant...about the history of American slavery” (Leight 2018). Many of these proclamations and associations are at best confusing and often disturbing to hear and watch. They create a cognitive dissonance with other considerations from West’s past. For example, Trump’s open embrace of white supremacist groups seem dissonant with West’s 2005 declaration of George Bush’s racism on *Saturday Night Live* (Terry 2015). His 2019 album, *Jesus is King*, is a complete change of direction from his declaration, “I Am a God,” from 2013’s *Yeezus* album. West’s comment about slavery seems particularly odd as an African-American and from someone who has rapped in a number of songs about racial injustices. It seems unconscionable that one would release a song like “New Slaves” from 2013’s *Yeezus* and then, a few years later, misconstrue the history of slavery (Leight 2018). Something seems uncanny in these contradictory encounters.

Despite these dissonant and uncomfortable perceptions of West’s apparent switch in political and sociological perspectives, there is something vaguely familiar about West’s outbursts. There is something about them that feels both like West is right at home and like we are also at home with our experiences of watching West, as though something inside us says, “Oh, yeah. That’s just Kanye West.” The familiarity of these experiences is likely due to the fact that we’ve seen them before – many, many times. West’s proclamations seem both eerie and familiar. Or, better stated, our *personal experiences* of West’s proclamations leave us with *feelings* that are both eerie and familiar, terms often attached to the uncanny. This paper explores the idea of the uncanny, parsing out some of its meanings within the history of ideas, and then examines the idea of an uncanny experience in two specific works by Kanye West, the songs “Fade” and “Famous” from the album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016). In doing so, it looks at both the songs and their music videos to unpack how and why we might have an uncanny experience while listening to and watching these videos, an experience that also registers with these public, extramusical encounters with West.

Uncanny – History and Definition

A full exposition of the history of the uncanny is beyond the scope of this paper. This term is ubiquitous in modern culture. For example, we discuss uncanny resemblances, uncanny abilities, and uncanny feelings and experiences of various kinds. In one of the best-known works on the uncanny, Sigmund Freud himself notes that the term “is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general” (Freud 2003, 123). As the term is so common, a brief history and exposition of my particular meaning seems important.

Freud essay, “The Uncanny” (1919) is perhaps the seminal work on the topic. Freud was responding to an earlier essay, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” written in 1906 by Ernst Jentsch. Jentsch also notes that the uncanny is difficult to define, as it consists of a psychological experience that is unique to each individual’s encounter with a given trigger. For Jentsch, an uncanny feeling arises when a person’s intellectual and psychological certainty is disrupted while observing something familiar, when one’s perception of its action transforms from self-evident to needing greater exploration. In this case, Jentsch cites the uncanny as a positive experience. “The feeling of uncertainty not infrequently makes its presence felt of its own accord in those who are more intellectually discriminating when they perceive daily phenomena, and it may well represent an important factor in the origin of the drive to knowledge and research” (Jentsch 1993, 4). Jentsch highlights the uncanny experience that often follows the viewing of wax figures, which closely resemble their living muses, but lack the animation of the original familiar entity. Jentsch’s reference to wax figures is significant, especially for an interpretation of

the uncanny in West's "Famous" video. "The finer the mechanism [in the case of animated representations] and the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance" (Jentsch 1906, 10).

Despite attempts to distance himself from Jentsch's definition, Freud notes a similar quality in the uncanny experience, defining it as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" yet whose meaning is "concealed and kept hidden" from the observer (Freud 2003, 124, 132). Freud draws from the German philosopher, Friedrich Schelling, adding that "the meaning of...the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (Freud 2003, 132).

After an exploration of the uncanny in E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sand Man," Freud notes the unique power of the artist to create an uncanny effect.

[The writer, interpreted as musician for this paper,] adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of a sense of the uncanny in normal experience; whatever has an uncanny effect in real life has the same in literature. But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience; in his stories he can make things happen that one would never, or only rarely, experience in real life. In a sense, then, he betrays us to a superstition we thought we had 'surmounted'; he tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. We react to his fictions as if they had been our own experiences. By the time we become aware of the trickery, it is too late: the writer has already done what he set out to do. Yet I am bound to say that the effect he achieves is not an unmixed success. We are left with a sense of dissatisfaction, of resentment at the attempt to deceive us (Freud 2003, 156-157).

One additional point made by Freud is of particular importance to this exploration of the uncanny in West's music. Freud highlights the uncanny feeling created by the reanimism of forms that would otherwise not be. "... [A]n uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth. This is at the root of much that is uncanny..." (Freud 2003, 150-151). Mentioned by both Jentsch and Freud, this idea of reanimation – of discomfort regarding whether something is a real person or a substitutive recreation, apparition or physical being – is at the core of my exploration of West's videos.

More recently, Nicholas Royle and Gordon Bearn have revisited the uncanny, placing it within the history of ideas and philosophy. Bearn ties the uncanny to ideas in Aristotle, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Bearn separates the uncanny from the merely eerie, describing it as a systemic breaking of our psychological security.

In contrast to the eerie, the presence of what ought to be absent is uncanny. What we are sure must be absent, will not have been rejected by proof, but by something rather more mysterious.... Similarly when the presence of what ought to be absent shakes this security, it will not have been accomplished by raising reasonable doubts, but by setting off a systemic insecurity.... [W]e may say: the uncanny unmoors the world (Bearn 1993, 38).

Nicolas Royle revisited the idea of the uncanny with perhaps the most extensive exploration yet on the subject.

The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself...seems strangely questionable. The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical...disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names..., of places, institutions and events. It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was 'part of nature': one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. But the uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness or alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context (Royle 2003, 1-2).

Drawing from this history of the uncanny, this paper will focus on the following facets of the uncanny, as found in the music and videos for Kanye West's songs "Fade" and "Famous": 1) Jentsch's idea that the uncanny involves some kind of intellectual insecurity. (Jentsch 1993), 2) Freud's boundary between fantasy and reality, in which the writer moves "beyond what is feasible in normal experience," rekindling superstition "promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it." 3) Bearn's idea that "the presence of what ought to be absent is uncanny" (Bearn 1993, 38), and 4) Royle's "crisis of the proper," disturbance of the natural, and comingling of the familiar and unfamiliar (Royle 2003, 1-2).

Fade

The lyrics and music of “Fade” are somewhat simple, addressing a fading love, a loss that is felt on both an emotional and psychological level during their absence as well as presumably on a physical level during the sexual act. The lyric “deep down inside” clearly references both psychological and sexual perspectives. In doing so, it expresses vulnerability in the admission of loss of both love and relational power. The lyrics are otherwise neither particularly diverse nor complex, marked by an unexceptional repetition that is mirrored in the music’s key of d minor, its pentatonic bass riff, and its repetitive drum loops. Lyric and music content lure the listener into a sense of consistency and familiarity.

The video for “Fade” is equally conventional and monotonous in its narrative progression. It consists of a woman, Teyana Taylor, dancing in a gym. It exudes not only sexuality, but also an overcoming of gendered stereotypes. Taylor’s dancing is markedly primal and sexual, expressing confidence and power through gestures such as chest thrusting, hand gestures of pushing away and punching and open-legged stances. After Taylor opens the video seated at a weight bench and occasionally reengages the bench by leaping over it, the weight room is mostly set in the background. In light of the lyrics, this rendering of the weight room represents a cliché image of strength and power that has been overcome by both the dancer and the love interest in the lyrics. The only other interaction with gym equipment involves brief thrusting and straddling of the punching bag. These images also evoke a powerful overcoming of misogynist tones frequent in West’s music and throughout rap, hip hop, and much of popular music. All of this seems strikingly familiar and not particularly uncanny. The closing of the video, however, moves quickly to unexpected realms, instantly evoking a sense of the uncanny. Taylor’s dance routine closes with her face down on the floor, thrusting her abdomen toward the ground in a clearly sexual manner while pounding her fist to the regular pulsating beat of the bass drum. She signals the close of the main section of the song by turning in a writhing manner toward the camera.

Here, the music shifts abruptly. The pulsating regularity suddenly ceases, shifting to a less active rhythmic structure. Bass drum hits now occur eight beats apart, embellished with periodic snare and hi-hat hits. The lyrics shift to alternations of a man’s voice singing “I feel it” after which a woman’s voice repeats “deep inside, deep, deep down inside.” A gospel choir joins the texture, singing “Oh, I’ve been lifted, yes!” The video shows Taylor and her then boyfriend, now husband, Iman Shumpert, intimately intertwined in a shower. This is not an odd scene change. The video’s visuals, music, and lyrics directly address or even lead toward such a sexual encounter.

All of this remains strikingly ordinary and familiar until the final fifteen seconds of the song. A return of the pounding bass drum from the opening as well as the ascending arpeggiated bass riff mark a turn toward something uncanny. Taylor and Shumpert are now standing facing the same direction, spooning and looking directly at the camera. This is the first time in the video that the so-called fourth wall has been broken. Its breaking signifies a removal of the normalcy and psychological security provided thus far in the video and a move toward the uncanny. We are familiar with the images of Taylor and Shumpert from the shower scene. They are both known characters in the video; however, something jarring and unexpected happens. We are immediately struck by Jentsch’s quality of intellectual uncertainty. The scene we will see opens with a close up of Taylor. Her face has transformed with cat-like alterations made to her nose and upper lip. As the camera pans out, we find Taylor and Shumpert naked in the gym, skin glistening from sweat or the shower or both. Taylor’s cat-like image is enhanced by the presence of a tail, an odd juxtaposition against Shumpert’s fully human form. We find a child and a herd of sheep, hiding the child’s and Shumpert’s presumed nudity. Set against a musical outro of bass riff and drums, the scene evokes an uncanny feeling, inciting a potentially long string of questions. Jae Blaze (Yoo 2016), choreographer for the video, has explained the cat-like imagery and the child at the end of the video as representing Taylor’s transformation into an empowered lioness, protecting her family. The perceived uncanny transformation within the video remains, particularly on an initial viewing, due to the otherwise dissociative transition in scenes from the dance scene in the gym to the video’s closing artistic imagery. Blaze’s notion of the empowered lioness aligns well with the sexual power exuded in the opening of the video, enhancing the familiar portion of the uncanny experience. Nevertheless, on first viewing, lacking any authorial explanation, the viewer is left with a series of questions, each contributing to an experience of the uncanny. Why has Taylor partially taken on the form of a cat? Why has Shumpert remained fully human? Although with all the surrounding images, *has* he? Why are we back in the gym? Why is there a baby? Why are there sheep? What do these images mean? Our initial perception of this sudden change of imagery is that any of these things *should* be absent, but have instead been inserted into the scene without a meaning that is immediately apparent to the viewer, at least on first viewing.

These questions lead to a sense of Jentsch’s intellectual uncertainty, Bearn’s insertion of something that should be absent, and Royle’s disturbance of the natural and proper, leaving us both familiar and unfamiliar at the same

time. Kanye West has served as Freud's writer, crafting a narrative that disrupts our sense of fantasy and reality. We are bound to the reality of Taylor and Shumpert's humanity and sexuality, only to have that reality transformed into a scene of fantasy involving projections of either anthropomorphism or zoomorphism, depending on your vantage point, and that disruption of our intellectual bearing on what exactly we are looking at is at the heart of why this final scene in "Fade" leaves us with an uncanny experience.

Famous

The uncanny experience encountered in West's "Famous" video is somewhat different than the jarring change at the end of "Fade." Rather, "Famous" opens in a dream state. We encounter clouds set to ethereal ambient sounds that lead into a scattering of quickly changing sound clips and images, connected in various ways to many of the controversies mentioned earlier in this paper, controversies that later manifest themselves in the video's images. Opening vocals by Rihanna descend into the song's primary beat and hook. West's lyrics address the concept of fame, particularly as it interacts with his controversies, both those highlighted by the persons in the video and hints of other relationships predating his current fame. The lyrics mention his well-known MTV confrontation with Taylor Swift, but the uncanny experience is primarily from viewing his controversial video.

West's "Famous" video is comprised of panning through a large bed with famous people with whom West has engaged in different ways. West, a well-known art enthusiast, mirrored this scene after Vincent Desiderio's 2008 picture, *Sleep* (Standen 2016). In West's version, the following people are found sleeping in the bed together, from left to right: George W. Bush, Anna Wintour, Donald Trump, Rihanna, Chris Brown, Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Kim Kardashian West, Ray J, Amber Rose, Caitlyn Jenner, and Bill Cosby. Many of these figures have controversies of their own as well as through their interactions with West and each other. These associations provide a level of familiarity in viewing the video. They also create discomfort, both in their nudity, all fast asleep after an implied orgy of some kind, although West has denied the purposeful portrayal of an orgy (Standen 2016), as well as discomfort from a sudden uncertainty regarding the reality of the images. This juxtaposition of fantasy and reality is a primary source of the viewer's experience with the uncanny.

West has purposefully withheld any knowledge of who is real and who is a wax figure, although we can presume that George Bush, Taylor Swift, or Ray J are likely constructions given their negative history with West. This ambiguity invokes Royle's association with the comingling of the familiar and unfamiliar found in the sense of the uncanny. Although West and Trump's friendship slightly predates the release of the "Famous" video, Trump's presence in the video seems prophetic of their relationship's progression from admiration toward open friendship. The uncanny in "Famous" results from this unknown, which immediately, as Jentsch notes, "transforms [our perception and comprehension of the images] from self-evident to needing greater exploration." As the video pans in and out, moving slowly from figure to figure, each person's animism is left in question. They appear peacefully asleep, next to associations both friendly and antagonistic. Both their nudity and sleeping state provide a vulnerability that also contributes to our discomfort. We are left with Jentsch's intellectual uncertainty regarding their current status as real or wax. Following Bearn's focus on the "presence of something that should be absent," we are confused by why some of the people are there. Royle's crisis of the proper and natural is also present in our uncanny experience. Much as with "Fade," we are left with more questions than answers. West seems to dislike that person; why are they here? West seems to admire that person; why are *they* here? Is that actually Kim Kardashian? Is that actually Kanye West? That can't possibly be Anna Wintour, right? Since we are strongly assuming George Bush is not in the video, is it also not West? What is the meaning of their nudity? What happened last night? Who slept with whom? Why is that uncomfortable? Why is this familiar and unfamiliar at the same time? Why does this make sense but also leave us uncomfortable? Each of these questions contribute to a sense of the uncanny. West has again effectively utilized Freud's acknowledgement of the artist's unique ability to disrupt fantasy and reality. Indeed, each author on the uncanny has used the standard example of the uncanny in the reanimation, either ghostly or physically, of someone presumed dead. West's realistic portrayal of these images results in a somewhat parallel experience, juxtaposing reality and fantasy, familiar and unfamiliar, animate and inanimate, or at least an ignorance on whether they would be if they were awoken.

Conclusion

It certainly seems from a philosophical perspective that both of these videos have brought to life something previously hidden within West's unconscious. These videos evoke both of Royle's perspectives of the uncanny that "it can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context" as found in "Famous" "or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context" as found in "Fade." Further explorations of the uncanny could certainly be undertaken in West's short feature film, *Runaway*, in connection with his album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, an album concept that certainly evokes the commingling of reality and fantasy present in the uncanny.

Bibliography

- Bearn, Gordon C. F. Spring 1993. "Wittgenstein and the Uncanny." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 76, No. 1, 29–58.
- Dandridge-Lemco, Ben. June 25, 2016. "Here's The Painting That Kanye West Recreated in The 'Famous' Video." *The Fader*. <https://www.thefader.com/2016/06/25/vincente-desiderio-sleep-kanye-west-famous-video>. Accessed April 23, 2019.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1919. *Das Unheimlich*. Imago 5. 2003. "The Uncanny." Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin Books.
- Jentsch, Ernst. 1906. "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen." *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift*, 8.22. 1995. "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." Translated by Roy Sellars. *Angelaki*, 2.1: 7–16.
- Leight, Elias. May 1, 2018. "Kanye West Says 400 Years of Slavery 'Sounds Like a Choice'." *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kanye-west-says-400-years-of-slavery-sounds-like-a-choice-628849/>. Accessed May 24, 2019.
- Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Standen, Dirk. June 24, 2016. "Kanye West on His 'Famous' Video, Which Might Be His Most Thought-Provoking Work Yet." *VanityFair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/06/kanye-famous-video-interview>. Accessed April 23, 2019.
- Yoo, Noah. August 29, 2016. "Kanye's 'Fade' Video Choreographer Explains Teyana Taylor's Dancing and Cat Face." <https://pitchfork.com/news/67885-kanyes-fade-video-choreographer-explains-teyana-taylors-dancing-and-cat-face/>. Accessed April 23, 2019.