The Return of the Repressed: History, the Family, and the Freudian Uncanny

While homes in general are shaped by larger power structures, the particular agents of domination often reside in the home itself, with some inhabitants exerting a truly tyrannous control over the minds and bodies of others (Douglas, “The Idea of Home” 277). Children, for instance, are often seen as key inhabitants of truly homely homes, but many parents do not grant them much “agency in the running or representation of these homes” (Blunt and Dowling 115). Such familial domination in fact plays an important part in E. T., for it is because Elliott’s mother would surely not allow E. T. to stay that the boy hides him from her. Indeed, given that Elliott at one point literally keeps E. T. in the closet, his fear of parental sanction may productively be read from a queer perspective: the alien, it seems, must not come out. More generally speaking,
what counts as a ‘proper’ or ‘homely’ home very often depends on individuals’ physical and moral conformity to cultural ideals and prejudices, and the supposedly private family home often serves as one key site where these values are passed on to future generations.

To some extent the formative influence of childhood homes explains the widespread assumption that learning more about someone’s home tells us something about the kind of person they are. As we have already seen, it is precisely this assumption that motivates Elliott to convey the meaning of “home” to E.T.: the boy wants to find out where the alien comes from in order to understand what kind of being he is. Such a “conflation of home and self” is, as Rosemary Marangoly George points out, a central trope in various disciplines: “literary theory, architecture, sociology, political science, geography, philosophy and psychology” (19). At the same time, Marangoly George highlights the danger inherent in conflating home and self, as those who are homeless, or who happen to live in ‘deviant’ homes, may easily come to be judged as faulty selves (24). This is all the more so because, as Blunt and Dowling observe, in any given society or culture “a central feature of imaginaries of home is their idealization: certain dwelling structures and social relations are imagined to be ‘better’” (100). Historically specific ideals of a ‘stable home’ help explain, for instance, why ‘unsettled’ nomads have repeatedly been regarded as a threat to societal order, with the nineteenth century in particular witnessing a worldwide onslaught on nomadic ways of life (Bayly 434; Osterhammel 173).

In addition, the formative influence of childhood homes is one reason why the family is of such crucial importance to the discourse of psychoanalysis. In her study *Figurations of Exile*, Barbara Straumann even suggests that psychoanalysis is “the most paradigmatic critical discourse of twentieth-century culture to address questions of identity and belonging as well as the fundamental dislocation subtending all subjectivity” (13). Freud, for instance, famously used a bourgeois domestic metaphor when he argued that the ego “is not master in his own house” (*Introductory Lectures* 285), and such concepts as the family romance and the Oedipal triangle between mother, father, and child, are of course central to psychoanalytic endeavors. In addition, in later texts – such as *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) or *Civilization and Its Dis-

The most frequently evoked text by Freud on the issue of home is, however, his essay on the uncanny: a type of fear that arises when one is confronted with something that seems other to oneself, but which in fact represents a repressed, unassimilated part of the self. Noting that the German word *unheimlich* (‘uncanny’) not only contains the word *heimlich* (‘secret,’ ‘hidden,’ or ‘covert’), but is also related to the homely and familiar (e.g. *das Heim*, *heimelig*; “The Uncanny” 126–134), Freud argues that the uncanny is best understood as “something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148).

The double or *Doppelgänger* is, for Freud, one particularly frequent motif associated with the uncanny (141), and E. T. in fact functions as the uncanny double for Elliott. As Julia Kristeva notes, initially one’s encounter with the double “is a shock” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 188) – and in Spielberg’s film, shock is Elliott’s first reaction at seeing E. T. when the boy stumbles upon him in the field behind his suburban home. Crucially, E. T.’s reaction mirrors Elliott’s precisely, and they flee from each other in panic. In time, however, Elliott overcomes his initial reaction of shock and coaxes E. T. to the safety of his room. There, E. T. soon becomes sleepy, and Elliott, too, drifts off to sleep, as if to emphasize the extent to which they mirror each other. In a later sequence, in the course of which Elliott explains the contents of his room to E. T., the alien tries to eat Elliott’s toy car, prompting the boy to exclaim: “Hey, wait a second!}

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30 The German original runs: “[Das] Unheimlich ist wirklich nichts Neues oder Fremdes, sondern etwas dem Seelenleben von alters her Vertrautes, das ihm nur durch den Prozess der Verdrängung entfremdet worden ist” (“Das Unheimliche” 264).

31 Jung’s concept of the shadow is in fact very similar to Freud’s notion of the double. This becomes apparent, for instance, in Jung’s essay “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious”: “[T]he meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment. But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved” (20; § 44). The German original runs: “[D]ie Begegnung mit sich selbst gehört zu den unangenehmeren Dingen, denen man entgeht, solange man alles Negative auf die Umwelt projizieren kann. Ist man imstande, den eigenen Schatten zu sehen und das Wissen um ihn zu ertragen, so ist ein erster kleiner Teil der Aufgabe gelöst” (“Über die Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten” 23). For a good summary of Jung’s concept of the shadow see Murray Stein, *Jung’s Map of the Soul* (105–124).
No! You don’t eat ’em. Are you hungry? I’m hungry” (Mathison 69). The emotional parallel between them thus continues, and while Elliott goes to the kitchen to grab some food, E. T. explores the boy’s room and finds an umbrella. Suddenly, the umbrella opens and startles, not only E. T., but also Elliott, who is still downstairs in the kitchen. This moment makes it clear to the audience that there is a mysterious telepathic link between the two – and Freud explicitly mentions telepathy as yet another motif typically associated with the uncanny (141).

Given E. T.’s function as Elliott’s (initially) uncanny double, there is a good case to be made that the alien in fact represents Elliott’s unconscious. Thomas Sebeok, for instance, has pointed out that E. T. and Elliott are not merely friends, but in a profound sense “identical, as the boy’s very name, Elliot T, insinuates” (661). From ‘Elliott’ to ‘E. T.’ by means of condensation and displacement: we are faced with two of the crucial mechanisms of the Freudian unconscious.32 Moreover, in one scene in Spielberg’s film E. T. makes a notably appreciative noise when seeing Elliott’s mother, Mary, in a tight-fitting Halloween costume, as if Elliott’s Oedipal desire for Mary had been displaced onto his alien friend. In fact, a scene was cut from the final version of the film that would have rendered this Oedipal dimension much more explicit, with E. T. going into Mary’s room and leaving some candy on her pillow to imply “that E. T. had a crush on Mary” (Mathison 104). One may therefore speculate that the filmmaker’s decision to cut the scene constituted an act of censorship in the precise psychoanalytic sense of an attempt to repress inadmissible desires.

Another sequence, at the end of which Elliott kisses a girl in school, not only strengthens the idea that E. T. embodies Elliott’s unconscious, but also suggests that even desire itself – that seemingly innermost part of our nature – is in fact shaped at least in part by public forces. In this complex sequence, the film intercuts two different scenes: on the one hand, we see E. T. exploring the family home while everyone is away at school or work, and on the other hand we follow Elliott’s adventures in the classroom. Throughout the sequence, the telepathic link between E. T. and Elliott is emphasized, as when E. T. drinks some beer that he discovers in the fridge, which leaves not only him, but also Elliott notably inebriated (with E. T. bumping into the kitchen cabinet, and Elliott winking at a pretty girl and then slowly sliding off his chair, onto the classroom floor). Both the alien and the boy eventually recover their wits, and we see E. T. watching TV while Elliott is now in biology class, where he and his classmates are expected to anesthetize frogs and then to dissect them. Elliott, however, when looking at

32 For a brief summary of these mechanisms see Freud, The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious (20–21).
the helpless, lonely frog on his desk, is suddenly reminded of E.T.; muttering “Save him” to himself, the boy first frees his own frog and then proceeds to liberate the others (Mathison 88) – which, unsurprisingly, leads to chaos in the classroom. The film now cuts back to E.T. watching TV, and we find him watching a “soppy love scene” from the movie *The Quiet Man* (Mathison 90). E.T. watches engrossed as the male protagonist grabs the arm of his female counterpart, pulling her close in a dramatic sweep and kissing her as passionately as only movie heroes can. Next, we return to the classroom, where Elliott will soon re-enact this heterosexual fantasy scenario with the pretty girl he had winked at earlier on. The scene thus bears out Slavoj Žižek’s claim that cinema “doesn’t give you what you desire; it tells you how to desire” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*) – which in turn implies that our desires are to some extent alien to ourselves, shaped and mediated in crucial ways by the public media discourses to which we are exposed even in the privacy of our homes.33

It is at this point that we must note that E.T.’s role as a representation of Elliott’s unconscious shifts from being at first associated with the Id (e.g. Oedipal desire) to becoming an embodiment of the super-ego. If E.T., in the beginning, provides Elliott merely with a mirror image of his own psychic drives, then after his death and resurrection the alien becomes an awe-inspiring, messianic figure who urges Gertie to “[b]e good,” and who thus voices – very much in the Name of the Lacanian Father – the moral imperative commonly associated with the super-ego (Homer 57–58; Thurschwell 48). In passing, we may observe that E. T. tells only the female child to be good, and that this is perhaps due to the misogynist bias that Phyllis Deutsch detects in Spielberg’s film (12–13). More importantly, for the time being, we must note that E. T.’s death is the moment when the telepathic link between the alien and Elliott is finally broken, as if to emphasize that the boy has now moved beyond his earlier, narcissistic identification with the double or mirror-image, and instead accepted the symbolic call of a newfound father figure.34 It is precisely such intimate notions as desire and the uncanny, as well as the question of how the father’s material and symbolic position within the familial home relates to wider socio-historical contexts, which

33 For a more general account of this Lacanian claim that Žižek makes in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes) see Žižek’s *Looking Awry* (6). For two similar accounts of the self as inseparable from otherness see Julie Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), and Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (1990).

34 Note that Terry Eagleton describes the symbolic order as a structure in which we are “never entirely at home,” in part because the imaginary always remains with us as a kind of excess (*Trouble with Strangers* 84).