

Double or Nothing: The Uncanny State of Post-9.11 America

Gregory Therel Esplin

Talk about *déjà vu* all over again! If any word describes the contemporary situation of the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001, it would be *uncanny*. The uncanny is reflected even in the details of the World Trade Center's destruction: everything related to the incident seems come in doubles. It occurred on the date in which the number one is repeated twice: 11. The United States President in '01 was George Bush. Not the first one, but the second: Bush II. And then of course there is America's involvement in another September 11: the one that occurred in 1973 when a U.S.-supported junta overthrew the democratically elected, left-wing President of Chile, Salvador Allende, ushering in years of right-wing terrorism which left thousands dead. A feeling of eerie repetition also surrounds September 11, since this was the second time Islamic fundamentalists attacked the WTC, the first being the 1993 truck bombing of the North Tower which left six dead but failed to bring down the structure.

Finally, of course, there is the "double" nature of the Twin Towers themselves. Dominating the skyline of lower Manhattan, the Towers were an uncanny thing to behold. It was not so much their height that invoked a feeling of the sublime, but rather their repetition as imposing duplicates. They were officially referred to as One and Two World Trade Center, but popularly they were known as the Twin Towers. It was not enough to merely build the tallest building in existence. More than this, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey wanted to double this accomplishment, in a sense speaking to the very capital in which it was constructed (New York, New York). Even though the Sears Tower soon surpassed the height of the WTC buildings, it had nothing of the haunting quality of the Twin Towers.

The importance of their status as doubles was not forgotten by Jean Baudrillard in his essay "Requiem for the Twin Towers", published shortly after the attack. Describing the identical buildings, he writes:

The fact that there were two of them signifies the end of any original reference. If there had been only one, monopoly would not have been perfectly embodied. Only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates. There is a particular fascination in this replication. However tall they may have been, the two towers signified, none the less, a halt to verticality. They were not of the same breed as the other buildings. They culminated in the exact reflection of each other. The glass and steel facades of the Rockefeller Center buildings still mirrored each other in an endless

specularity. But the Twin Towers no longer had any facades, any faces. With the rhetoric of verticality disappears also the rhetoric of the mirror. There remains only a kind of black box, a series closed on the figure two, as though architecture, like the system, was now merely a product of cloning, and of a changeless genetic code.¹

In this formulation, then, the twin nature of the structures connotes the domination of Capital and its emphasis on duplication, all driven by the force of exchange value, which – following Marx's suggestion in *Capital* – functions to impose a universalizing effect on human life in the abstract form of money. Drawing on this insight into how the buildings embodied the nature of capitalism in its drive to clone itself throughout the world, Baudrillard suggests that the effect of the two New York attacks was synergistic: more than a matter of $1+1=2$, the destruction of both Towers yielded an equation of terror more on the level of $1+1=3$. For Baudrillard, the WTC attacks represent an assault on global capitalism, not simply a strike on the United States.

While I will return to these questions about capitalism and September 11, I first want to explore further incidences where the figure of the *doppelgänger* occurs in the American response to the attacks. We see a manifestation of the double in the Bush Administration's effort to suggest a connection between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. With the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the American campaign in Afghanistan is doubled. Of course, we cannot forget that Bush II's foray into Iraq is itself a doubling of his father's 1991 invasion. Even the year 1991 is an odd double of sorts: a duplication of the numbers one and nine, albeit in transposed order.

We could think of other instances of the double in post-9.11 America: the reappearance of Rumsfeld, Cheney, and Powell, all who have had appointments in previous presidential administrations. We could even point to the fact that Bush II has twins, who are known to indulge in the same antics of alcoholic misbehavior as their reformed father. At the risk of repeating myself: America is indeed an uncanny place.

In trying to make sense of all this repetition, it may be fruitful to interrogate exactly what we mean by the word *uncanny* in this context. In doing so, we find that the Freudian concept of the uncanny, *das unheimlich*, provides a model upon which an analysis of the current political and cultural forces at work in America might be based. Hoping that my reflections here be taken as more than simply my two-cents' worth on American politics, I want argue that *unheimlich* and its attendant violence is haunting the project of Western modernity. The 9.11 attacks serve to highlight the extent to which existing democratic projects – and the American one in particular – have yet to be fully actualized, leaving a traumatic reminder that seems to resist integration into the larger forces behind the reigning universalism of the global era. Before turning our attention to particular

examples of this phenomenon, however, we must first investigate the history of the uncanny in twentieth century thought.

Freud himself recognizes a particular doubling in the concept of the uncanny. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud opens with an extended meditation on the word's complexities. In German, of course, the word *unheimlich* is related to home, *heim*. The uncanny is, therefore, the unhomely. As Freud explains, however, the homely and the unhomely are intertwined. "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *Heimlich*."² Here, Freud is suggesting that the word is itself haunted by its opposite; that what makes the uncanny so frightening is that it is somehow strangely familiar. For Freud, the uncanny functioned as a "return of the repressed" in which one is confronted with that which he had previously attempted to suppress. In the current American messianic project, the non-exclusivity of the uncanny Other again appears in the repressive, militaristic efforts to install "democracy" in Iraq.

On The Department of "Unheimlich" Homeland

After September 11, the Bush Administration instigated an unparalleled reorganization of the federal bureaucracy, leading to the creation of the "Department of Homeland Security". The largest division of the federal government, Homeland Security clearly indicates the strategy of Bush II's government to replicate the United States' obsession with national security during the Cold War. In addition to marshalling support domestically, the reality of the Cold War demanded that the governments of Western Europe follow the prerogative of Washington. However, the Department of Homeland Security does more.

Consider the possibility of calling it the "Department of Domestic Security", or even the "Department of National Security". The effect is radically changed; something is lost. The importance of the word "homeland" cannot be dismissed. As a rhetorical device, homeland reifies a conception of home that is far from self-evident. Whether plastered on the crassly produced backdrops against which Bush is televised delivering his speeches, or included in the nationalistic, self-aggrandizing language of the orations themselves, the phrase "defending the homeland" is an incantation that seeks to instantiate itself in the minds of observers as a concrete reality by way of repetition. Homeland, of course, does not merely denote a preexisting sensibility, but actively creates national identity. Through the notion of home, current configurations of physical space are naturalized. "Homeland" works to lead us towards the erroneous conclusion that

land x has always been our home: that we have been destined, perhaps divinely, to occupy it. We assume that our national borders were always there, instead of recognizing them as historically contingent, established by violence and conquest. Thus, the rhetoric of homeland has a special retrospective power. By way of our current temporal position, we retroactively impose meaning on the contingent events that have led to present circumstances. Because historical acts bring about the present state of the world, we mistakenly believe the events that lead to the current state of things are simply a matter of teleological necessity. Thus, in one swoop, the historical violence of the American nation is naturalized, enabling the justification of future aggression to defend the security of our "homeland".

Oddly enough, though, the corrective to this nonsense may perhaps lie in the uncanny nature of "homeland". Suppose citizens adopted the notion of home to demand a more livable world: a world in which wages were adequate, housing and healthcare affordable, and government was responsive to popular opinion. Is this not the antithesis of Bush's America? As the Bush Administration rejects the prospect of "governing by polls" on the homefront, it simultaneously demands democracy in Iraq. Perhaps we should take Bush's democratic vision more seriously than he himself seems to do. Isn't this what the Canadians, French, and Germans have done in rejecting Bush's invasion of Iraq?

A specter is haunting America—the specter of Communism

In sitting down to formulate this admittedly poor play on the words that Marx and Engels use to open *The Communist Manifesto*, I discovered in that text something I don't remember noticing before: the peculiar repetition of the word *specter*. Why didn't Marx and Engels simply write "the specter of Communism is haunting Europe", instead of "a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism"? Perhaps because in repeating "specter" they point to something of its ghost nature, insofar as the possibility of a reorganization of economic structures will always haunt the existing order of things as a sort of double to the world as it is. This specter cannot be entirely suppressed. Regardless of the severity of our attempts to exorcise it, the specter of such utopian reconfigurations will return. Even following the West's self-congratulatory rhetoric of 1990s, which celebrated the triumph of Western Capitalism over Communism after the fall of the Soviet Union, the uncanny nature of the Other cannot be entirely forgotten.

Take, for example, recent events in Iraq. When Saddam Hussein was captured by the United States' occupying forces in December 2003, the American media – eager to show Iraqis celebrating this news – broadcast images of locals cheering and waving the Soviet flag. A symbol of an extinct nation, its visibility

in this context speaks to the desire for something other: not American, not Iraqi. Bafflingly, the news anchor's voiceover explained that "Iraqis rejoiced on the street, waving American and Iraqi flags", even though the only flags to be seen bore the insignia of the hammer and sickle. Moreover, many of the flags clearly lacked quality, as if crafted out of whatever materials were at hand. On many of them the insignia was oddly fashioned, askew. In this uncanny repetition of similar yet flawed Soviet flags, we find an image of hope. Not uniformly constructed, the mismatch of poorly crafted hammers and sickles spoke to the yearning for something better. In these handmade Soviet flags, the singularity of each is apparent. Against mass reproduction, they speak of human input rather than mechanized duplication. Uncannily, the Americans also were thinking of the Soviets when they named a fateful mission "Operation Red Dawn".

Red Dawn Revisited

When Saddam Hussein was captured, he had apparently stocked his hideout with Mars candy bars and Spam. The age of multinational globalism has truly arrived when Saddam eats the very same food that we do. However, without question, the most intriguing aspect of the United States military operation that nabbed Hussein was its name: "Operation Red Dawn". For my generation, raised on 1980s popular culture, *Red Dawn* holds a special significance. The first film to be granted the MPAA rating of PG-13, *Red Dawn* starred 80s luminaries such as Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen. Set in a small town in the Rocky Mountains, the film depicts a surprise Soviet-Cuban invasion of the American "homeland". Swayze and Sheen play brothers who lead other Colorado teenagers in a resistance that defeats the superior occupying forces through the use of guerrilla tactics. Thus when the United States military dub the mission that captured Saddam Hussein in late 2003 "Operation Red Dawn", one wonders about the intent of this reference. Were the Americans admitting to playing the role of "occupiers", a word that the Bush Administration so vehemently renounced early on in "Operation Iraqi Freedom"? If so, why?

The motives of the military personnel responsible for naming "Operation Red Dawn" are far from clear. Perhaps, though, instead of simply dismissing it as a manifestation of the oxymoronic quality of "military intelligence", we might consider the possibility that this seemingly obvious oversight is, actually, brilliant ideology at work. In fusing the capture of Hussein with the odd admission of parallels between the U.S. invasion and the Soviet Union, the reality of American aggression is made more palatable: "Yes, it's true we are doing everything we once feared the Soviets would do - invading sovereign countries against the objections of other world powers, rejecting the validity of international

organizations - but even so, we got Saddam. We can't be all that bad."

Regardless of its intent, the military has reminded us with "Operation Red Dawn" that America in Iraq entails a bit of the *unheimlich*. This homage to 1980s paranoia carries with it something haunting: we have become that which we once renounced.

In invoking the supposed threat to the "homeland" to justify foreign invasion, Bush II doubles America everywhere. In an uncanny turn of logic observable in previous invasions by imperial powers, the invasion of a foreign land is justified as a defense of one's own. Turning to the film, we are reminded that home seems to enable defense by all available means. In one scene, a young insurgent hesitates before executing an unarmed Soviet prisoner. "If we do what [the Soviets] do, what makes us any different?" he asks Jed (Patrick Swayze), the older, paternalistic leader of the resistance. Jed responds: "Because this is our home!" Jed's expression finds its double in today's political atmosphere: when asked to respond to moral concerns regarding preemptive attack, Bush responds that after September 11, a new approach to foreign policy must be taken.³ Since the United States was attacked on the "homefront" by elusive Islamic fundamentalists, the United States must - through any means necessarily - eliminate all possible threats that its wise stewards have identified. To maintain freedom here at home, we are told, we must sacrifice it abroad. "Better to fight them over there," the militarists explain, "on the streets of Baghdad than in New York or Philadelphia."

Patrick Swayze meets Sergei Eisenstein

On innumerable levels, *Red Dawn* is uncanny. It is indeed an uncanny experience - reminiscent of Barthes's experience with the photograph of his mother as a child - to observe future Hollywood stars such as Swayze and Sheen as teenagers. The uncanny appears again in the fact that, as its director John Milius has remarked, much of the studio's enthusiasm for funding the project arose because the film mirrored the Afghan resistance and affirmed their struggle. In 1983, the year before *Red Dawn's* release, Ronald Reagan issued a statement commemorating "Afghanistan Day":

To watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson - that there are things in this world worth defending. To the Afghan people, I say on behalf of all Americans that we admire your heroism, your devotion to freedom, and your relentless struggle against your oppressors.⁴

After September 11, it was the Americans who were in Afghanistan, claiming – as the Soviets had – that their occupation would improve conditions for women by allowing them to attend school, appear in public and so on. This uncanny reversal further reveals itself in the fact that the Americans' own weapons were being turned against them. Instead of Soviet choppers, the Afghans were now attempting to bring down American ones, using the U.S.-made Stinger surface-to-air missiles once funneled into the country by the Americans in the 1980s for the Islamist rebels fighting the Soviet occupiers. Both Hussein and Bin Laden were once friendly with the Central Intelligence Agency. In a sense, these two figures have come back to haunt the Americans.

Red Dawn's uncanniness finds its most prominent instantiation in the fact that it is a double of an earlier Soviet film. In *Red Dawn*, our young insurgent protagonists visit one of the boys' fathers in a "re-education camp", a former drive-in movie theatre refashioned by the Soviet occupiers. As father and son share a few moments before the gang retreats into the woods, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* is projected on a screen in the background. In a surprisingly intelligent way, the plot of Eisenstein's work is the model for *Red Dawn*. Invaders threaten our way of life. We unify and defeat them. The scene in *Red Dawn* that depicts a projected *Alexander Nevsky* in the background mirrors a similar episode from the latter. In both scenes, a father has been captured by the invading forces and, accepting the imminent nature of his own death, instructs his children to live on to resist. The last words of the father, played by Harry Dean Stanton, are taken directly from *Alexander Nevsky*: "Avenge me!"

Responding to this demand, however, is not as simple as both films infer. The question plagues us as well. In his book *The Specters of Marx*, Derrida suggests that we have not yet fully reconciled ourselves to the problem of Marx. Using the figure of Hamlet, Derrida argues that we must come to terms with the ghost of our father, Marx. However, this reckoning cannot be a simple matter of extracting an equivalent revenge. Instead, there is something at the core of our trauma which must resist any attempt to quickly exorcise it. Derrida writes:

This trauma is endlessly denied by the very movement through which one tries to cushion it, to interiorize and incorporate it. In this mourning work in process, in this interminable task, the ghost remains that which gives one the most to think about—and to do. Let us insist and spell things out: to do and to make come about, as well as to let come (about).⁵

If we were to read Derrida's understanding of the father's call to be avenged against both *Red Dawn* and *Alexander Nevsky*, one is struck by the fact that the reckoning comes far too easily. In mourning the loss, we must deny – on Derrida's account at least – the possibility of a replacement. This perhaps is what we might keep in mind as we mourn the deaths of those who died in the tragic

events of September 11. Their ghosts speak of no “lessons”, proclaim the victory of no ideologies; they only remind us, haunt us with the reminder that we are their doubles. Their testimony can only speak to the fact that they once lived, as we live now, and then they died, as we will one day as well. In marshalling their deaths for political purposes, we deny them respect.

That *Alexander Nevsky* was one of Stalin’s favorite films speaks to this opportunistic appropriation of the suffering of others for instrumental ends. Justifying the need for strict leadership, Eisenstein’s film depicts the rise of a peasant to defend the Russian homeland against invading Mongols. When Alexander must use a strong arm with the enemy or his own people, he does it only in the interest of the homeland. Is there not something of this sensibility at work in the fondness conservatives have for citing the fact that Abraham Lincoln suspended the right of habeas corpus during the American Civil War? Following Derrida’s notion of the incommensurate core haunting our loss of the dead, we would do well to remember that this void cannot be filled by false substitutes such as a homeland.

As manifestations of nationalist propaganda, both films draw heavily on the motif of the land, the physical earth. In each film, nature seems to ensure the essential relationship of our dwelling as mortals within the world. At the end of the film, we see the rock upon which our young insurgents have inscribed the names of their fallen comrades. This works to figure a fundamental relation between the people and the land. Such a natural relationship is the aim of recent attempts to install a homeland in our political and cultural consciousness. In response, we can only insist that at the heart of our home is a certain bit of the uncanny. Rejecting this nationalism as a false substitute, we must accept the lack, which makes any project attempting to exorcise the uncanny from our home an incomplete one.

Bombs in My Dreams

Near the conclusion of “The Uncanny”, Freud remarks on the relationship between the uncanny and fiction:

In the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place...there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life.⁶

In the over eighty years since these words were published, technological developments have enabled far more extensive “means of creating uncanny effects” than Freud could have possibly imagined. Rather than assuming the exclusivity of the realms of fiction and real life, I argue for the possibility that the

uncanny can serve to blur these boundaries. The Pentagon's post-Vietnam awareness of the media means that when it comes to war, fiction and reality are now intertwined. With these boundaries no longer clear, the uncanny contains both the potential for even more violence, in dubious efforts to instantiate it, and redemptive possibilities for new conceptions of alternative homelands, not restricted by traditional spatial boundaries. Is not a true global homeland the dream of Marx? In recognizing the imaginative possibilities that lie within reality, we find the figure of the uncanny frustrating nationalist attempts to claim a fixed homeland. The revolution in global communications that emerged in the 1990s has done much to enable contact between those who, though spatially distant, occupy the same temporal position in the struggle towards a global homeland.

Like many I watched on television as bombs first fell over Baghdad. In the days and weeks that followed as the tanks advanced across the expanse of the Iraqi desert and into the city, I often left the television set on, even as I slept. I fell asleep to the rumbling sounds of destruction. In those liminal moments, between consciousness and sleep, I experienced a few minutes of blissful awareness of an alternative reality. Before I drifted off into deep sleep, dwelling in my amnesiac dreams, I remembered the hope – faint though it might be – that perhaps all this insanity of war could be escaped. Lying in my bed in a comfortable home, I watched the uncanny on my television. As much as it haunts me, through this instantaneous relay of bits, through this mechanism of Global Capital, television betrayed, if only for a moment, the *unheimlich* that is haunting America: one morning I awoke to red flags carrying the images of hammers and sickles being waved – eagerly, madly, hopefully – by Iraqis on the Fox News Channel.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002), 43-4.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 226.

³ During his reelection campaign of 2004, Bush, criticizing his opponent, said, "While America does the hard work of fighting terror and spreading freedom, he has chosen the easy path of protest and defeatism. He refuses to acknowledge progress, or praise the growing democratic spirit in Iraq. He has not made democracy a priority of his foreign policy. But what is his strategy, his vision, his answer? Is he content to watch and wait, as anger and resentment grow for more decades in the Middle East, feeding more terrorism until radicals without conscience gain the weapons to kill without limit? Giving up the fight might seem easier in the short run, but we learned on September the 11th that if violence and fanaticism are not opposed at their source, they will find us where we live. America is safer today because Afghanistan and Iraq are fighting terrorists instead of harboring them." See "President's Remarks on Homeland Security in New Jersey," October 18, 2004 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/10/20041018-11.html>>.

⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Message on the Observance of Afghanistan Day," March 21, 1983 <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1983/32183e.htm>>.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 98.

⁶ Freud, 249, emphasis in original.