

## **The uncanny and the superflat in macabre representations: Iconographic analysis of a Kawanabe Kyosai blockprint**

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### **Abstract**

The experience of the uncanny has been loosely codified in the fields of aesthetics, psychology, and visual arts as phenomena that give rise to feelings of uncertainty, eeriness, anxiety, and creepiness; however, no academic consensus has been achieved in articulating a unified and coherent theoretical account of the uncanny as an epistemological concept since Ernst Jentsch' *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906) and Sigmund Freud's (1919) take on E. T. A. Hoffmann's Sandman (1816). Keeping in center the development of a theory of the uncanny, this paper delineates and clarifies theoretical uses of the 'uncanny' in aesthetics and reformulates it as an ambivalence of space which creates anxiety and makes the understanding of space both challenging and discomfoting. Using Edwin Panofsky's three-level approach, the paper looks at the Japanese painter and printmaker Kyosai Kawanabe's *Jigoku Dayu* (1874). Through iconographic analysis determines how Kyosai found inspiration in macabre folklore, depictions of death, and his era's social and cultural changes to develop an aesthetic proposal underpinned by the uncanny comprising liminal, macabre and satirical imagery. It employs Jentsch's and Freud's concept of the 'uncanny' (1906), and Murakami Takeshi's theory of superflat which describes the loss of centrality of suffered by any subject depicted in flattened forms of Japanese visual arts. The paper argues that the properties of superflat and *ukiyo-e* give rise to the uncanny by breaking down perception of subject centrality and creating an emerging film in which all the subjects exist in a flattened space. The paper also states that this, coupled with the other distortions in construction of space and saturation of figures, when added to the symbolism of the subjects--skulls, monsters, reversal of religious Buddhist values--serve as catalysts for anxiety, eeriness, and the uncanny. The paper, thus, shows the uncanny presence in the analyzed visual text.

**Keywords:** Uncanny, Superflat, Aesthetics, Kawanabe Kyosai

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## 1. Introduction to the uncanny presence in Japanese visual arts: superflat and ukiyo-e

The term uncanny is a generic term used by philosophers and literary critics to denote a theoretical and broad assessment of the phenomena of the strange, eerie, unsettling, ambiguous, and ambivalent (Trigg, 2012). However, no consensus has been achieved in formulating the uncanny as an analytical concept useful in approaching contemporary aesthetics manifestations of the mentioned phenomena. Moreover, most studies of the uncanny have been founded on a descriptive mode in which they have sought to identify its principal characteristics with relation to specific media production, built to describe the different projects of its various artists and their culturally bound experiences (Masschelein, 2012).

This paper seeks to answer the question- how can uncanny be used to analyze the effect of superflat on *ukiyo-e* compositions. This paper proposes that the uncanny is an aesthetic concept that can be codified as the disruption of cognitive identification via ambivalence and use it to analyze the effect of decentralization occurring in flattened forms of Japanese visual arts, which creates anxiety in the spectator and makes the understanding of space both challenging and discomforting. Superflat applied in *ukiyo-e* suggests the possibility of a visual field devoid of perspective and devoid of hierarchy, in which all subjects exist equally and simultaneously; *ukiyo-e* aesthetics make assigning of centrality via form, space, line or color to the subject matter an ambivalent process (Steinberg, 2004). Thus, I intend to extend this concept of flattening to *ukiyo-e* painting, by providing an iconographic analysis of Kawanabe Kyosai's blockprint, *Jigoku Dayu No.9 (1874)*, where a self-organizational process of perception occurs when the loss of perspective and centrality happens in such a way that there is no identifiable central theme of the artwork; decentralization gives rise to uncertainty, eeriness, and anxiety. The paper examines the concept of uncanny as discussed by Freud and Jentsch in the section below, along with the superflat as proposed by Takeshi Murakami and Azuma Hiroki, followed by the iconographic analysis of Kawanabe Kyosai's blockprint (Figure 1) titled *Jigoku Dayu No.9 (1874)*.

The paper begins with an exploration of the concept of the uncanny and its properties drawn from Freud's work. The next sections then delve into Jentsch's work to talk about the uncanny as an intellectual uncertainty, followed by Turner's liminality as well as Murakami's superflat as well as superflat and *ukiyo-e*. The paper then describes the methodology and offers the analysis of liminal imagery in the selected artwork, i.e., Kawanabe Kyosai's *Hell Courtesan (Jigoku Dayu) no.9* (Figure 1), post which, the final section presents the findings and conclusion.

## 2. The concept of the uncanny and its properties

The concept of uncanny was first explored and elaborated, as is mostly understood today, by the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1919) in his famous essay *The Uncanny*, as a theoretical device created to explain the recurrence and re-iterations of traumatic experiences (Masschelein, 2012, p. 33). Throughout his essay, Freud gives several definitions of the term in the intent of relating it to his general theory of repression, particularly in association with the interpretation of E. T. A. Hoffman's *Sandman* (1816). However, Freud (1919) primarily defines the uncanny as something, which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless intruded into the consciousness a way to relate the concept to his theory of anxiety.

In the first place, if psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every effect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things, there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it must be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was originally frightening or whether it carried some other effect (S. Freud et al., 1955, p. 241).

If an individual experiences a traumatic event, the mind stores it as a memory and represses it from coming out into the conscience. If an analog or similar experience triggers the individual, it leads to the return of the repressed. According to Freud (1919), the experience of anxiety is the underlying cause of repression. Repression here is the mechanism by which traumatic experiences are stored and relived in the mind to protect the ego. This process, however, is also mentally harmful since it is cyclical: the repetition of fixed traumatic content manifests itself as an anxiety attack (fight or flight response) which further reinforces the trauma.

This process causes a segmentation of the self, which is divided and split as a result of the conditions and content of repression and its reiteration. It blocks the complete recollection of the traumatic experience, which relieves the mind from the complete burden of reliving the trauma (in that sense is a defense mechanism, which protects the self). The uncanny, Freud argues, appears when the emotional affects generated by repression turn into morbid anxiety, following the same defensive mechanism.

Freud in *The Uncanny* (1919) says that the compulsion of reliving one's traumatic past comes from a reiteration of familiar experience, which is both provider of solace and cause of neurosis. "Everything that is called *unheimlich* that should have remained buried and hidden but has come to light" (S. Freud et al., 1955, p. 225); thus the uncanny event implies a return to time and space of

profound recollection, a repressed terror that entraps the conscious processes of the mind into a cycle of the unfamiliar becoming the familiar.

However, in certain instances, the experience of the uncanny does not come out of the hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it. In the essay, Freud says that uncanny has two possible definitions: a psychoanalytical one (uncanny is caused by anxiety and the return of the repressed), and the other one (related to non-personal experiences of eerie, macabre, and unsettle fictions). The former definition of anxiety and return of repressed does not fully explain how the uncanny works in fiction where there is no previous traumatic experience by the reader of a tale or the reader of a black novel, for instance.

In the case of the latter, Freud says there are two possible explanations- first is a phylogenetic explanation meaning that as a species humans share the same traumatic experiences as the Oedipus complex or the mother-child separation. Those are universal experiences of all human beings and hence are universally shared trauma. In the fiction, any setting in which the author employs description of the trauma of childbirth, for example, or erotic fantasies dealing with paternal or maternal figures, for instance, can trigger the uncanny as a return of the repressed separation or sexual taboo.

The second one is an ontogenetic explanation that deals with the mental development of an individual, which is the surmounting of irrational and magical beliefs such as monsters, fairy tales, and superstitions. For example, it is common for children to be afraid of the dark in the belief that dangerous creatures are populating dark corners. With age and psychic maturity, an individual surmounts these previously held beliefs. Writers of fiction use these previously held beliefs and present them as real and probable in their settings, which creates the effect of the return of the repressed memory. In the case of fiction, an individual can experience the uncanny in an impersonal manner (without a traumatic memory), when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed, which causes the sublimation of macabre and unsettling settings and lets the individual find pleasure in the recurrence.

### ***The Uncanny as intellectual uncertainty***

Perhaps the most synthetic formulation of the uncanny can be found on the essays and dissertations of the German psychiatrist Ernst Anton Jentsch (1867-1919) whose theories about the uncanny and the processes behind its emergence in modern society predate the Freudian framework. In his famous essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)*, (Jentsch, 1997) presents confusion and intellectual uncertainty as the condition that produces the feelings of dread and fear in the spectator:

Among all the physical uncertainties that can become a cause of the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one particular that can develop a fairly regular, powerful a very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being is really animate and, conversely, doubts as to whether a lifeless object may not be in fact animate. (Jentsch, 1997, p. 15)

Jentsch's central thesis is that the uncanny essentially involves an experience of 'psychical uncertainty' which leads to intellectual uncertainty. Jentsch affirms that secondary doubts are repeated compulsively when confronted with human representations which are not actually human.

The inability of recognizing a perception as a particular entity or object would trigger a sensation of danger and thus create dread, eeriness, and the uncanny. Two conditions are described by Jentsch that lead an individual to experience the uncanny: 'lack of orientation' and 'intellectual uncertainty'. Lack of orientation is defined by Jentsch (1997) as a certain limitation on the intellectual capacity, such as a deficient education, faulty cognitive abilities, or youth (as a lack of experience) which would lead to perceive the external world as 'new, foreign and hostile' opposed to 'old, known and familiar.' As affirmed by Jentsch (1997) in the same essay, intellectual uncertainty is a negative affect: the inability to apprehend what is given to the senses. This mechanism is driven by the mental necessity of safety and control over the environment and presupposes a defensive, reactionary conception of the human mind battling the chaotic nature of the world.

The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one's environment is a strong one. Intellectual certainty provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence. However, it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected (Jentsch, 1997, p. 16).

Put plainly, for Jentsch the relation of a person with their surroundings and their inner mental fortitude determines the level of neurosis and apprehension that one may experience when confronted with new objects or situations. For whom the feeling of danger, due to the lack of intellectual certainty, leads to the experience of the uncanny.

Another important component of Jentsch's uncanny is the representation and perception of nature and order. For Jentsch (1997), another explanation for the feeling of dread and uncertainty is a breach in the usual understanding of reality, which may be caused by confusion, and it is closely related to anxiety about one's safety:

One can read now and then in old accounts of journeys that someone sat down in an ancient forest on a tree trunk and that, to the horror of the traveler, this trunk suddenly began to move and showed

itself to be a giant snake. If the doubt as to the nature of the perceived movement lasts, and with it, the obscurity of its cause, a feeling of terror persists in the person concerned (p.8).

In his account, this disruption in the process of perception causes confusion and the suspension of the capacity to properly categorize. 'Nature and order' and the regularities of reality assimilated in the mind are what constitute a human intellectual mastery and are directly related to physical certainty. Jentsch argues that a disruption in the processes of cognition, of representation, implies a disruption in the subject-object relation and the most inner conception of identity. A transgression or disruption of the order of nature, where we confirm the progression of events or constituents of normality, unsettles basic assumptions that are hardly questioned. This experience is akin to be robbed in the safety of our own home, after which the value of safe and unsafe is inverted; home becomes unhomely.

For Jentsch, the experience of the uncanny is a negative affection which is manifest insofar as the conditions of intellectual uncertainty are present, which are undesirable altogether. However, art and artistic intention are viable outlets to create a representation that breaches the normal cognitive assumptions. Instances of those breaches can be usually found in fantastic fiction, *noir* fiction, and especially in horror fiction. In these narrative texts, the uncanny is often associated with themes of madness and delusion, and an ambiguous suggestion of the supernatural. Arthur Machen, Welsh author, and his mystic offers an endless supply of narrations that invokes the uncanny via the disruption of nature and order. A celebrated passage of Machen's short story *The White People*, first published in 1904 perfectly illustrates how the uncanny emerges from the disruption of the natural order:

What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it.

And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning? (Machen, 2011, p. 76).

More than being the result of past, recurring trauma or memories, this illustration of the uncanny draws from the confusion and grotesque spectacle of the subversion of the normal order of nature; all beyond our control. The uncanny arises in those moments of liminal cognition, where the mind is in a state of cognitive indetermination.

The limitation of Jentsch is that the definition of uncanny for him is that – uncanny is the intellectual uncertainty derived from the desire to avoid physical danger. He argues that physical mastery of our environment is a phylogenetic drive that we share as a species. Extending this argument, he says that intellectual control is also a necessity of the species in the same way as the physical control to avoid danger and to survive. So intellectual uncertainty generates the same kind of fight or flight response as

uncertainty about our surroundings or our environment. A physical danger, for example, the presence of a predator triggers this fight or flight response. Intellectual uncertainty comes under two sets of conditions- in a transient way when an individual misidentifies a perception such as confusing a branch on the ground to be a snake or a shadow or silhouette to be a person. This dissolves as soon as the individual gains control or understanding of his perception with clarity. However, in cognitive-compromised individuals or cognitively underdeveloped individuals (such as children) who cannot easily gain control of their perceptions about their surroundings, the effect of cognitive uncertainty is long-lasting and stronger. The uncanny arises in those moments of liminal cognition, where the mind is in a state of cognitive indetermination.

The main limitation of Jentsch's account of uncanny is noted by him- that he does not offer a definition of uncanny as a theory or as a conceptual construct. He only provides exclusively psychological examples in which the uncanny probably or commonly arises. His essay is only a general description of conditions and processes in which the affect of the uncanny arises with sufficient regularity.

Given that the psychoanalytical framework used by Freud and Jentsch is predicated as a phylogenetic structure of the mind, the uncanny as an affect is a felt emotion--a conscious effect of an unconscious mechanism--embedded in the process of perception and representation. Freud's postulation of the trauma of maternal separation at childbirth makes the concept of the uncanny a regressive experience that takes the individual back to the origin of its psychosexual development, which predates the ontogeny of the supernatural and superstition. Jentsch, similarly, conceptualizes the uncanny in two main forms which are tied to the imperative needs of a subject in a changing, and potentially hostile, environment. The universality of the uncanny as a psychoanalytical concept is given by the theoretical framework. Yet, the manifestation which the uncanny takes in *ukiyo-e* compositions, and specifically in the work of master Kyosai is context-specific to the cultural and historical conjuncture of Edo Japan and in this case determined by the stipulative argument of categorizing the analyzed work as superflat, is relevant and points to material conditions and practices which influence artistic production; however, an historical analysis of the mentioned conditions would shift the focus of this paper away from this paper focus, which is the how properties of superflat give rise to the experience of the uncanny.

### 3. Liminality

One of the properties of the uncanny very central to this analysis is liminality as in Victor Turner's *Liminality and Communitas* (Turner, 1969). Liminality is a concept that belongs to the field sociology to refer to a middle phase of a ritual process in which an ontic change occurs – a change of

nature or status alters the fundamental properties of an entity. The process of a ritual in which such a change happens can be analytically divided into three phases: a) separation, b) liminality, and c) incorporation. The middle stage of phase is where a moment and space of indeterminacy arises for the entity subject of the ritual; no longer having the properties of the previous phase but not yet acquired the properties of the next phase. In the words of Turner ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

Liminal entities have one foot on the immediate plane, dimension or *topos*, and another in an unrecognizable plane; as such, they escape law, ritual, and conventions and are neither subject of cognition nor determination. The most usual examples given by sociologists are the rituals of the passage of children into adulthood. However, the epistemic flexibility of liminality in dealing with states of ambiguity, and the in-between has enabled and extended use by disciplines such as literary analysis, art, and even medicine. For instance, in art analysis, the study of subjects such as death, unborn children, darkness, opaque bicolor, non-visible colors of the spectrum, eclipses and invisibility, the conceptualization of liminality is useful in describing a spectrum of attributes of ambivalence. Liminal entities may be portrayed as devoid of material possession, which their lack of foothold on the community’ shared space implies; ghosts, monsters, and all sorts of liminal beings are usually represented without any insignia, emblem, or heraldic coat, which implies their ‘outcast’ status from any ontological order. This representation is so since liminal beings are reduced and stripped down of any power; they are in a ‘waiting room,’ a phase or transition space that precludes them from participating from any hierarchy or kinship system.

#### **4. Superflat and *ukiyo-e*: space and composition**

Murakami Takeshi’s theory of superflat talks about the diversification of themes and inclusion of a variety of interpretations into a painting or piece of art, such that there is a loss of centrality (Lamarre, 2004). The theory continues to explain that this diversification tends to flatten out the various dimensions projected by the perspective in a composition and/or decentralized in its subject matter, thus creating an emergency field that functions as a database from where stock design and visual patterns can be obtained by any observer in order to create a personalized aesthetic experience (Azuma, 2004). ‘Basically, they all see a radical break with definable subject positions... In other words, the distributive visual field involves a breakdown in perceptual distance, which results in a purely affective relation to the image’ (Lamarre, 2004, p. 161). In effect, a marginal subject can become a prima subject; since there is a rupture in the organization of a composition centrality and marginality become redefined by viewers. This is the result of a non-hierarchical visual field of forms and shapes. What Azuma calls ‘over-

visualized world' or 'database structure' is the new structure of reading and scanning a visual piece (Azuma, 2001, p. 51). Azuma (2001) proposes parallels between *ukiyo-e* and superflat compositions, which implies that the visual emergence field arises when reading *ukiyo-e* artwork.

*Ukiyo-e* are Japanese woodblock prints that depicted the Edo Period upper class in leisure activities, dream-like situations engulfed by an aura of sensuality and tranquility (Kaempfer, 1978, pp. 57–59). This style of painting depicted worldly pleasures in the backdrop of the Yoshiwara district. In this style flatness of surfaces or shapes of color arranged across the space of a composition, as well as the use of empty background spaces, helped to create the illusion of buoyancy that the subjects depicted in the *ukiyo-e* are famous for. These two characteristics of the style, flatness of the subjects, and empty background spaces, allowed for ambiguity in the identification of the relative distance between subjects; even the relative size of subjects does not convey most of the time a clear idea of distance and space. Accordingly, *ukiyo-e* compositions present, as described by the superflat theory, an elimination of details through flattening of perspective and the subject represented.

*Ukiyo-e*'s arrangement of subjects usually sized many objects and characters hierarchically according to their spiritual or thematic importance, without regard for distance from the viewer, points of fugue, or amount of detail. The central figures are often depicted at the top of compositions along vertical lines. This is most probably intended, due to the nature of human vision, since the human eye sees all plumb lines as vertical lines parallel with each other. This was known long before perspective was invented: artists have not always known how to render volume, they used of verticality to create oblique and inverted perspective (Águila, 2007, p. 130). Accordingly, in *ukiyo-e*, the only method to indicate the relative position of elements in the composition was by overlapping of subjects in a plane through juxtaposition. In that context, juxtaposition creates the illusion of different planes, background, foreground by locating the subjects and figures in an arranged overlapping pattern; however, it does not provide perspective or information of relative distance between subjects. In this way, juxtaposition is widely used in *ukiyo-e* to overcome the limitations of its block-printing technique.

Though not clearly conceived as a catalyst for subjective construction or appropriation of the composition process, *ukiyo-e*'s aesthetics allow for a personal and subjective interpretation of the subject's hierarchy and space; ambiguity and liminal spaces seem to arise from such situation.

Though superflat is a postmodern concept, created from a culturally specific reading and interpretation of Japanese visual culture, this paper defines superflat as an a-historical concept for the following reasons: a) since the uncanny affect is produced by the visual ambiguity and the non-hierarchical visual field contained in the definition of superflat, any visual composition which acts as a catalyst the uncanny by ambiguity in the identification of the prima subject, the perception of an

emerging field and the rapture of marginality and centrality within the composition, can be categorized as superflat. An implication of coupling uncanny and superflat is proposing the uncanny as one necessary attribute of the style.

A rebuttal of the universality of the superflat aesthetics is present in James Nobis' (2014) paper *Modal Analysis of Superflat Aesthetics* where he argues that how superflat aesthetic features enable us to better emphasize the importance of Japanese cultural and historic context has in the understanding of images. He affirms that modal markers – namely, color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness – can be used to infer historical patterns and trends on Edo visual media and contemporary superflat images and goes to show how Murakami Takeshi is using *ukiyo-e* and Edo images to create coherence in the form of a national visuality, originating in Edo and culminating in the flat aesthetics of anime and manga; a social construction real for the intended audience because of Murakami's deliberate use and manipulation of modal markers in his work (Nobis, 2014, p. 23). In this sense, Murakami is referencing Edo's visual culture, its specificity as a historical conjuncture. This contrasts with criteria of modernity (in the west) where the evaluation of art depended on the adequation of the composition and subjects to abstract parameters of beauty, above the technique (Volk, 2010).

### **5. Employing iconographical analysis: three functions of the uncanny.**

This paper aims to provide an iconographical analysis and interpretation of *Hell Courtesan (Jigoku Dayu) no.9* (1874) by Kawanabe Kyosai, illustrated in Figure 1. Also, because the analytical methods used (iconographic analysis) require addressing a visual context that demands to be reconstructed by examining similar composition from the same period and depicting similar subjects, the pieces *Hell Courtesan, Ikkyu and Skeleketons* (1880) (Figure 2) and *Skeleketons seducing a beauty* (1875) (Figure 3) are also discussed. This study employs Erwin Panofsky (1972) 'three levels of iconographic approach' (1972, pp. 5–8) as the iconographic method of analysis in this thesis for analyzing the following visual texts Panofsky's first level consists of a basic physical description of the form and figures; the second level interprets and identifies symbols and motifs and describes them narrowly and independently; the third level interprets the totality of the composition and explains it as a coherent unity.

The first two levels are used in the thesis to describe and examine the selected artwork, as well as to refer the discussion to the framework proposed in the previous sections. The paper then utilizes the third level to identify certain functions that are hidden in the works of Kyosai. These uncanny devices, namely, satire, *yokai*, and memento mori correspond to 'the use of humor or exaggeration to criticize,' 'a

change in perspective to defamiliarize,' and 'symbolism of death' as will be taken as a function of visual analysis for the chapters:

a) Satire: the coupling of dissonant and contrasting images and symbols with the purpose of comedy, mockery, or irony, to create social commentary.

b) *Yokai* or the supernatural: the depiction of monsters, apparitions, or entities that defy categorization or identification because they exist in liminal spaces defined as binary oppositions; sacred and impious, day and night, life and death.

c) Memento Mori: the confrontation with the idea of death and mortality.



Figure 1. *Hell Courtesan no.9, 1874*. Kawanabe Kyosai. Color woodblock print; 34.4 x 23 cm. Tokyo Metropolitan Library. Image from the series '*Drawing for pleasure is by Kyosai*' published by Sawamura Seikichi (1874).



Figure 2. *Hell Courtesan, Ikkyu, and Skeletons*, 1880. Kawanabe Kyosai. Hanging scroll, ink, color and gold on silk; 137.1 x 69.3 cm. Israel Goldman Collection, London, Photo: Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University.



Figure 3. *Skeletons seducing a beauty*, 1875. Kawanabe Kyosai. Ink and color on paper; 78.1 x 45 cm. Stadtmuseum Hornmoldhaus, Bietigheim-Bissingen, Germany.

## 6. Analysis: liminal imagery in Kawanabe Kyosai's *Hell Courtesan (Jigoku Dayu) no.9*

The *Hell Courtesan (Jigoku Dayu) no.9* (Kawanabe Kyosai Memorial Museum) from the series *Drawing for pleasure is by Kyosai (Kyosai Rakuga)*, a color woodblock print of 34.4 cm of height and 23 cm of width composed by Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889) and published by Sawamura Seikichi in 1874, depicts a beautiful courtesan seated in a priest's chair clad in a red cloak, dozing off, serenely propping her head up, letting fall from her hand a Buddhist whisk, amid a macabre visage of cavorting skeletons (Figure 1). The cavorting skeletons depicted are enjoying a dance, romping with their musical instruments, playing *go*, drinking *sake*, escaping their graves, dancing on top of headstones, and creating mischief.

Hidden under the woman's red cloak the figure of King Emma, the judge of the Japanese underworld is depicted as sneaking a peak from within the inner clothing of the woman. At the feet of the woman clad in red, an apprentice is kneeling showing her back, similarly dozing off and oblivious of the cavorting skeletons. Written on top of the woman there is an inscription that reads: picture of her dreaming of playful skeletons (*Gaikotsu no yuugi wo yume ni miruzu*). The interplay of all the imagery suggests this woman clad in red is the enlightened *Jigoku Dayu* after her encounter with the monk *Ikkyu* (1394-1481) (Figure 2).

The composition is set up in a cemetery, on a diffuse grey leaning blue background subject that evokes an ephemeral and otherworldly topos. While the composition summons nightmarish and macabre apparitions, the expression of the subjects added to the blissfulness of the procession conveys tranquility; a beatific aura that is in contrast with the macabre setting. The piece composition is arranged in a way that there is no resting place for the gaze of the spectator; the whole space is filled with figures either in depicted in action resting. This contraposition creates anxiety since its use of juxtaposition and overlapping of the subjects, paired with foreshortening, makes the understanding of space challenging and discomforting.

The distribution of subjects and space implies a breakdown of perceptual distance due to the mentioned use, or lack thereof, of linear perspective and the rendering of the subjects' size. Skeletons, the woman in red, King Emma all the subjects are overlapping in the same plane, with neither clear support of a *topos* in the background nor clear differentiation through size or detail that proper hierarchical use of perspective would require since all subjects except the woman in red share the same relative size. Moreover, master Kyosai applied pigment in clearly and precisely defined shapes of flat color, disposed along the lines of shapes to create a center of visual gravity in all planes of this piece, thus decentralizing the perception of space using shape and color (Clark, 1993, p. 31). This composition

begs the question of the central figure in the image or a prima subject and the secondary ones, and thus, creates a non-perspectival field with no clear main subject position.

The figure of the *Jigoku Dayu* formed part of the iconographic and literary repertoire of Edo Japan, usually a stylized feminine figure dressed in the garments of a courtesan (Clark, 1993, p. 101). Symbols which denote the identity of this subject (Figure 1) are the priest whisk, an *uchikake* kimono blazoning the likeness of King Emma or hell imagery, patterns of lotus flowers and leaves, auspicious imaginary of jewels together with the Gods of Luck, Bodhisattvas, and the presence of dancing skeletons (Kuroda, 2017, p. 225). The mentioned symbols conjure a sacred and impious imagery: *Jigoku Dayu* clad in red suggesting the figure of Bodhidharma, Emma or king of hell, the priest's whisk alluding the story of *Otoboshi* and the monk *Ikkyu* (Figure 2), the fortune god Hotei, and a variety of frolicking skeletons.

*Dayu* the designation for the highest rank of a courtesan, forms part of the iconographic catalog of Japan, bestowed in it the stylization of a feminine figure characterized as 'pleasurable women;' courtesans at leisure and promoted the entertainments to be found in the pleasure districts (Avilés Ernult, 2020). These women, differently to Geishas, were expected to provide dance, music, and conversation, as well as sexual intercourse (Buckland, 2006, p. 28). However, the title of master Kyosai's paint *Jigoku Dayu* plays an inversion of meaning, or perhaps a satire, since *Jigoku* denotes both hell and the lowest streetwalker prostitute in the Edo period (Kuroda, 2017, p. 230). The sublimation of sin through the syncretism of the figures of the monk and the high courtesan is remarkable. The allusion to *Otoboshi* and *Jigoku Dayu*, *Ikkyu*, and Bodhidharma is not gratuitous. The high courtesan is, therefore, a symbol of the instrumentalization of love, and generally susceptible to a spiritual transposition, which finds their foil in the figure of a monk or a priest (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009, p. 398) resulting in an image which partakes both realms, a liminal representation: the enlightened prostitute.

The image of the skeleton, in a similar way, symbolizes a dark potency and preeminent sovereignty of death. In alchemy, the skeleton is a symbol of black, putrefaction, decay and decomposition, colors, and operations that prelude transmutations (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1986, p. 731). This is not a static death or a permanent state, but a dynamic death, fluid, herald of a new shape, and or form of life. The depicted skeletons mirror the woman clad in red, creating a play of jolly irony and thoughtfulness: the symbol of the knowledge of who has crossed to the other side, the unknown, of those who have penetrated via death, the secret of the otherworld. The skeleton also indicates, during dreams the immanence of a life-changing event, breaking up with traditions, which the individual forebodes with anguish, without knowing what will happen (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1986, p. 481). This thematic connection with the skeletons in the piece above, suggests a tentative symbolic

identification between the deceased and the divinity, so there is an implied fluidity between life and death. However, this connection is not explored as much as the general allusion of death and the brevity of life, such as the frolicking skeletons tempt the viewer to do: enjoy ephemeral moments of life; which given the inversion of values and the consubstantiation of the images of skeletons, skulls, and death, it may indicate either an exhortation to reflect on the vanity of desire and earthly pleasures, or an invitation to enjoy the time we are alive.

The King Emma is a divinity that in his most basic function, a judge symbolizes justice. The figure of King Emma is of consciousness in the most elevated way (Clark, 1993, p. 86). Again, contrasting with the dilapidated world of pleasures, full of sensuality and sin, there is measure and justice in the figure of King Emma. There are the harshness and domination which balance morality and conduct. The courtesan and King Emma suggest a liminal cooperation between divinities: the blessed equality of Bodhidharma, and the ruthless justice of King Emma.

This type of synthesis of sacred and impious imagery was not a device exclusive to Kyosai. In literature, the earliest account of the *Jigoku Dayu* came to light in an anonymous anthology of stories titled *Ikkyu Kanto Banashi* (1672). (Buckland, 2006). In it is described the first poetry exchange of *Ikkyu* and a courtesan working at Sakai who will later become a disciple of the eccentric monk. Kuroda Kazushi (2017) argues that the mayor dramatizations of the *Jigoku Dayu* narrative were introduced to the Edo audience later by the *Honchou suibodai Zenden* (1809), in which the Sakai prostitute, after admitting *Ikkyu* inside of the Tamanaya house and her personal quarters, witnesses how the monk joins in a dance with countless skeleton shadows appearing in the room's paper doors. This miracle awakens the prostitute to the illusory nature of the world, she comes to see the impermanence of life and understands who *Ikkyu* is, and from that day on wears an over kimono with images of hell (Kaempfer, 1978, pp. 57–67). Under *Ikkyu*'s tutelage, she repents her sins as a courtesan and achieves enlightenment. and completes the transformation of the sinful woman into a spiritual being (Kaempfer, 1978, pp. 57–67). Thus, the liminal figure of the enlightened courtesan, the *Jigoku Dayu*, is developed as an identification of the properties of both the figure of a monk and a sinner.

However, even though this the synthesis of sacred and impious imagery was not a device exclusive to Kyosai, he was known for this fascination with the *Jigoku Dayu* narrative and produced several paintings depicting different scenes of the legend (Kuroda, 2017, p. 227); Timothy Clark (1993) alone counts seven different pieces depicting the subject, each one of them with spawning its own variations.

Kyosai's corpus emphasizes an interplay of themes such memento mori, satire, the depiction of *yokai* and death as the great leveler of humans; through compositions achieved with a combination of

hellish apparitions and mirages blended into traditional Buddhist narratives, in order to lampoon the new era of ‘civilization and enlightenment’ (*Bunmei Kaika*) which kick-started the process of transformation from Edo to Tokyo (Figal, 1999, p. 12). This Japan Kyosai experienced was undergoing a process of change, the arrival of the black ships to the Edo bay and the end of the policy of isolation (the Sakoku period), the instability of the shogunate and the Meiji restoration deeply impressed in the people of Japan a dynamic of rupture and continuity; westernization opposed to tradition (Lane, 1978, pp. 10–11). In response to this historical conjuncture, Kyosai produced profoundly satirical paintings and woodblock prints which made fun of the mentioned contradictions of modern life, as well as embracing the *Zeitgeist* of the times. Consequently, he made use of *yokai*, animals, corpses, deities, and demons to convey his criticism of the new burgeoning life of the Japanese (Clark, 1993, p. 17). Being himself quite knowledgeable about the life of sordid Yoshiwara district ‘the floating world’ (*ukiyo*) (Clark, 1993, p. 18), he invoked and imagined a universe of wit, stylishness, and extravagance--with overtones of naughtiness, hedonism, and transgression--out of the necessity of awareness of the impermanence of the world; a theme ever-present in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. This aesthetic motivation, to disharmonize and create dissonance in stagnant cultural representations underpins Kyosai art as an expression of the uncanniness of human life: horrifying distortions and caricatured forms; a confrontation of reality through fantastic irrationality.

It is noteworthy that Kyosai stands in a class of his own regarding the use of the uncanny imagery. If uncanny is, as previously stated, a category defined by liminality as a result of the disruption in the process of representation (cognition), and employed with the distinctive intention of unsettling the viewer via the depiction of unsent corpses (*yurei* and *yokai*), motifs of *memento mori* and ‘death as the great leveler’, satire, and the overall idea of death and life in a continuum; then Kyosai is the most prolific exponent of the uncanny of all *ukiyo-e* masters.

For instance, even though the images of *Ikkyu* and the *Jigoku Dayu* flourished during the Edo period – *Ikkyu* is usually depicted holding a staff (*shakujo*) adorned with a human skull clad in austere black monk robes – he is almost invariably shown presenting a skull to *Jigoku Dayu* or her, standing alone, performing in a play (Clark 1993, pp. 101-102). The triumvirate of *Ikkyu*, dancing skeletons, and *Jigoku Dayu*, conversely, is absent from depictions of the same period, such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi’s *Priest Ikkyu and Jigoku Dayu* (1852) or Hiroshige’s *Tokaidou gojusan tsui seki* (1845) (Kuroda, 2017, p. 225).

Another painting which depicts *Jigoku Dayu*, *Ikkyu* and frolicking skeletons, *Ikkyu and Skeletons* (1880), Kawanabe Kyosai (1831-1889), includes the same basic elements *sans* the absence of the monk, the beautiful woman stands behind a folding screen, inviting, she opens her *uchikake* robe

which is decorated with scenes of the gods of luck, fiery coral, lotus flowers, auspicious symbols of longevity and riches contraposing demons, the King of Hell Emma and Bodhisattvas – Bodhisattvas are associated with the circle of life and death. A troupe of dancing skeletons accompanies *Ikkyu* – painted in a dynamic *kyoga* style. There is a double play on meaning with the whole scene of the macabre hosts engaged in lively human activities, implying they have forgotten their death.

Issues of life and death are treated similarly in other of Kyosai paintings, thematically and conceptually connected to *Hell Courtesan no.9* (Figure 1), without depicting the three mentioned subjects. In *Skeletons seducing a beauty* (1875), this connection is evident by the interplay of a beautiful woman in kimono, four skeletons who are flirting with her, and, in the background a funerary procession of skeletons who carry a lantern which reads ‘gone anticipatedly’ (*sakimawari*) (Figure 3). The composition appears to convey that the woman is expected ahead in the realm of the dead. Meanwhile, the four flirting skeletons try to make the woman pay attention to them, to death itself. The previously mentioned tension experienced by the Japanese during the modernization of their country is again indicated by the top hat sporting skeleton and another one holding the carcass of a Japanese fan. Two takeaways are clear: firstly, human life is all the same, beautiful or ugly, western or eastern, everybody dies; secondly, the world is an illusion, there is fluidity between life and death.

Regarding the uncanny and its function, Kyosai’s amalgamation of the satire, *yokai*, and *memento mori* functions are present throughout this composition:

a) *Yokai* function: Kyosai uses skeletons as a symbol of the transmutation of human consciousness; from life to death. The skeleton in this role signifies the fluid connection between two realms which find their threshold in the liminal human figure ripped of all flesh. This uncanny function proposes the supernatural a device to depict and implicitly accept the contradictions of the modern life of Edo and the traditional world left behind but nonetheless spiritually potent. Similarly, skeletons, monsters, and *yokai* express the transition stage of binary concepts: sacred and secular, life and death, modern and medieval, known and unknown, etc.

b) satire function: this uncanny function is the most used by Kyosai in his *Jigoku Dayu* more so when we consider how the reversal of the natural and social order is a recurrence throughout his oeuvre. For all the humor and whimsy in which Kyosai revealed, there is a serious intention in his satire; most patent when we look at the converging of sacred and impious figures of the monk and the prostitute melded together. The marginal images are also indicative of satire directed to the decadent life of the upper classes which frequented the Yoshiwara district; the skeletons exhorting the viewer to remember their own mortality. In this sense, the Kyosai’s *Jigoku Dayu* is a satirical space which openly ridicules and chastises the society of Edo Japan.

c) *memento mori* function: The consubstantiality of the skeleton, skulls, and death works in tandem with the satire and *yokai* function, as it reminds the viewer of the fluidity of life and death. The skeletons and skulls dance, play, and exist in a liminal space which has become an extension of their life. Kyosai appears to be indicating that death permeates all life and reality; in our life, we are dying.

## 7. Conclusion

The presence of the uncanny in the world of *ukiyo-e* may appear as an anachronism in a framework, which is not indigenous to Japanese art and aesthetics. However, the phenomenon of intellectual uncertainty tied to the decentralization of *prima* subjects in a composition and the emergence of a decentralized database has its correlation in psychoanalysis, literary aesthetics, and Japanese pre-modern art. In the latter case, Japanese art, specifically *ukiyo-e* the uncanny as cognitive uncertainty has no formal precedent but, as an experience or phenomenon as derived from the composition, it is present, nevertheless. The viewer of *Hell Courtesan no.9* may experience feelings of anxiety, creepiness eeriness ambiguity, in sum, the uncanny. This is a result of the interplay between satire and the encounter with one's own mortality in a message carefully layered with circular allusions which can play back on the viewer as cognitive dissonance. A crucial aspect of the uncanny imagery employed in this piece is the systematic incoherence of marginal art placed within and against conventional depictions commonplace in the early Edo period; the reversal that upsets and satirizes the existing social and natural order.

An image with no clear *prima* subject is, therefore, an image where all subjects exist in a decentralized non-hierarchical database. The analyzed work of Kyosai Kawanabe *Jigoku Daiyuu* presents characteristics of superflat due to the lack of linear perspective, hierarchical perspective in favor of flatness, and clearly differentiated planes where the subjects are located, decentralizes all the subjects in the composition. This effect is created by the breakdown of perceptual distance due to the lack of the use of differentiated sizes as well as foreshortening. This contraposition, through the employment of juxtaposition and overlapping of the subjects, and paired with the lack of foreshortening, creates anxiety and makes the understanding of space both challenging and discomfoting, thus bringing out the uncanny as an experience of cognitive dissonance rather in line with the conception of uncanny of Ernst Jentsch. The decentralization is akin to ambivalence which is reinforced by the symbolic themes of synthesis and syncretism of the sacred and the impious expressed in the three uncanny functions found in the analysis.

These images--similar of which exist in *shunga*--seem inconceivable in a pious context and create a liminal representation, which suggests a reversal imagery. The conflagration of life and death is expressed as a counterpoint of life but also offered as a warming of the illusion of reality. And among the

bones and corpses, the courtesan slumbers peacefully, given the appearance of knowing all too well the façade of reality. This is one of Kyosai's main motifs, that underneath the appearances, beyond social status or power, we are all nothing but skeletons; a *memento mori*. Even though this study considers only one case, and given the prolific production of Kawanabe Kyosai, further analysis of other works with similar properties of decentralization of subjects would consolidate the thesis of this study.

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