“The Trumpet in the Bottom”
Öyvind Fahlström and the Uncanny

“Trumpeten i stjärten”. Öyvind Fahlström och det kusliga

0000-0002-2400-4124
Per Bäckström
Professor of Comparative Literature, Karlstad University, Sweden
per.backstrom@kau.se


ABSTRACT
Öyvind Fahlström (1928–76) began as a surrealist at the end of the 1940s, and among others wrote the unpublished poetry collection “The Trumpet in the Bottom”. In 1953, he wrote the world’s first manifesto for concrete poetry, inspired by Pierre Schaeffer’s musique concrète, and soon became a driving force in the Swedish and international neo-avantgarde. In the mid-1950s he turned to the visual arts, and later he also wrote radio plays, directed movies and arranged performances and happenings. He showed an extraordinary sensibility for the uncanny in his selection of “life material” for his art, thus uncovering the return of the repressed in everyday life and popular culture, in the form of scatology, pornography, the monstrous, the body, the materiality of the artwork and media, and so on. In his art, this uncanny life material was turned into political statements. In my article the discussion is exemplified from different genres of Fahlström’s œuvre, from his early texts and radio plays, to his visual art.

SAMMANFATTNING
Öyvind Fahlström (1928–76) började som surrealist i slutet av fyrtiotalet, och skrev bl.a. den opublicerade diktsamlingen ”Trumpeten i stjärten”. 1953 skrev han världens första manifest för konkret poesi, inspirerad av Pierre Schaeffers musique concrète, och blev snart en drivkraft i det svenska och internationella neoavantgardet. I mitten av femtiotalet övergick han till bildkonst, och senare skrev han också radiokompositioner, regisse-
rade filmer och arrangerade performance och happenings. Han uppvisade en extraordinär känslighet för det kusliga i sitt urval av “livsmaterial” till sin konst, på så sätt blottläggande “the return of the repressed” i vardagslivet och i populärkulturen, så som skatologi, pornografi, det monströsa, kroppen, konstens materialitet och media etc. I hans konst vänds dessa kusliga inslag till politiska uttalanden. I min artikel exemplifieras diskussionen från olika genrer i Fahlströms œuvre, från hans tidiga texter och radiokompositioner, till hans bildkonst.

**Keywords**
Öyvind Fahlström, The Uncanny, Avant-Garde, Concrete Poetry, Surrealism

**Nyckelord**
Öyvind Fahlström, det kusliga, avantgarde, konkret poesi, surrealism

The Swedish author and artist Öyvind Fahlström (1928–76) is famous for his contribution to concrete poetry, but he actually began writing as a Surrealist. In Fahlström's œuvre it is possible to detect a lifelong interest in uncanny phenomena, such as the monstrous or the fragmented and transgressive body, and in the uncanny aspects of media, popular culture and the materiality of the artwork. It was already fully developed in 1949 when he wrote the unpublished Surrealist poems collected under the title “Trumpeten i stjärten” (The Trumpet in the Bottom) – a title which is uncanny in itself, since it reveals the unfamiliar in the familiar.1 Fahlström's attentiveness to the uncanny, which will be the focus of this article, thus had its origin in the oneiric aesthetics of Surrealism, a movement that was inspired by psychoanalysis, the Gothic fiction of authors such as Horace Walpole and Edgar Allan Poe, as well as horror movies. In the following, I will investigate Fahlström's use of the uncanny, drawing attention to the fact that Fahlström often used material from both real life and popular culture, and put it in a context that revealed its uncanny qualities. I will demonstrate that Fahlström's creative process reveals a remarkable sensitivity to the uncanny, and show how he discerns what is at the same time familiar and secret in reality and fiction, since his material often exemplifies “something repressed which recurs” (Freud 1995, 11), or details that one does not normally expose.2 His artworks very often create a sense of alienation in the reader/viewer, a feeling which is strongly connected to both the uncanny and the political (Masschelein 2011, 136). My argument is therefore that the uncanny aspects of Fahlström artworks strongly contributes to their political meaning. I will discuss examples from his early and unpublished manuscripts, concrete poetry, radio plays and visual art.

*  

1. The title is most likely inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, especially the famous triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights (ca. 1505), where the Hell section shows a similar situation: a man with a flute inserted into his bottom. Nils Büttner argues that Bosch's Hell is uncanny: “Hell is above all uncanny for the very reason that it comes across as so familiar” (Büttner 2016, 56), which holds true of Fahlström's title as well. The manuscript of the poetry collection "Trumpeten i stjärten" belongs to the Fahlström collection, at the National Library in Stockholm, and a copy is in my possession. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.
Fahlström was, in April 1953, almost certainly the first in the world to formulate a manifesto for concrete poetry, and he was the first to publish a programme for concrete poetry, in 1954. And as we shall see, the uncanny plays an important part in his attitude towards language. In the manifesto, which is divided into two parts, one finds the obligatory revolt against tradition in part one, but also a striking formulation: “Words are symbols, of course, but that’s no reason why poetry shouldn’t be experienced and written on the basis of language as concrete matter” (Fahlström 2001). In this concise sentence, one can identify the main ideal for Fahlström, namely the use of language as the matter for poetry, the means to achieve the goal with the manifesto: in a very “concrete” way, he wants to use the words as objects to create poetical effects. Fahlström’s point of departure is a utopian urge to establish a concrete alternative, where “everything expressible in language and every linguistic expression has equal status in a given context if it enriches that context” (Fahlström 2001).

In part two of the manifesto he describes different techniques to create this new poetry, different ways to break with the expectations of the reader, and to create new poetical effects. For instance, he suggests systems that can be imposed upon the result of automatic writing.

His instructions for a new method for creating poetry end with a statement that has been adopted as the credo for concrete poetry in Sweden:

KNEAD the linguistic material; this is what justifies the label concrete. Don’t just manipulate the whole structure; begin rather with the smallest elements – letters, words. Recast the letters as anagrams. Repeat letters within words; throw in alien words, p l e a – v r o o g – s e – d o ; interpose letters that don’t belong, acatiaamniya for action; explore children’s secret code languages and other private languages; vocal glides: gliaouedly. (Fahlström 2001)

2. The experience of an uncanny effect/affect is of course highly individual (see Freud 1955, 241). I use the “effect/affect”-notion in accordance with Masschelein (2011). The theoretical development after New Criticism, in particular Rezeptionsästhetik and reader response theory, underscores the fact that the response of the reader is an individual experience. Fahlström’s own aesthetic emphasises the importance of an individual response to his artworks, as his basic concept “bisociation” suggests: “you have piece A and come across another piece, B, and the sparks fly wildly when the two are rubbed together” (Hultberg 1999, 166). This in no way should be interpreted as a controllable process. That the uncanny is only one of many effects/affects produced by an artwork, goes without saying. Fahlström uses the (uncontrollable) experience of all the effects together to create his political message, an avant-garde method well-known to most readers with a rudimentary knowledge of avant-garde aesthetics (see Bürger 1974). The notion of “avant-garde” has a heterogeneous meaning, not least depending on which language one speaks. I use it in a strict sense: avant-garde as a parallel movement to modernism and post-modernism, see Archambeau (2008) Bäckström (2008) and Archambeau (2016).

3. The manifesto, which was published in the little magazine Odysse in 1954 (Fahlström 1954a; Fahlström 2001), and heavily reworked into a programme in Expressen 1954 (Fahlström 1954b), takes the form of a traditional manifesto, which is usually divided in a violent attack on tradition followed by an aesthetics (see Hjartarson n.d.). Fahlström’s text did not have the word manifesto in its title until its republication in Bord–dikter 1966, but was mentioned by him and known as a manifesto already in the 1950s. I will therefore call it a manifesto from its creation and onwards.

4. This technique has been strikingly described as “words as things” (Key-Åberg 1963).

5. Fahlström’s style is elliptical, and sometimes not linguistically accurate, but this is the way he wrote. I have tried to remain true to his way of expressing himself in my translations, and have therefore not ‘corrected’ it to a more readable English.
In a few lines Fahlström demonstrates the methods of concrete poetry, and points out a pathway for the following generation of poets. At the same time his attention to the materiality of language reflects his sensitivity to the “uncanny”. Feminism, gender and postcolonial studies are but a few theoretical currents that have pointed out that the ostensible dichotomy between mind and matter has been used to legitimize male (colonial) power, and that materiality is something that has been subjugated in Western epistemology. Karen Barad, a representative for New Materialism, illustrates the problem:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing” – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. The ubiquitous puns on “matter” do not, alas, mark a rethinking of the key concepts (materiality and signification) and the relationship between them. Rather, it seems to be symptomatic of the extent to which matters of “fact” (so to speak) have been replaced with matters of signification (no scare quotes here). Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (Barad 2003, 801)

In this context Fahlström’s focus on the materiality of language can be considered as the “return of the repressed” for contemporary thinking; one of the circumstances that, as we shall see, links his choice of materials to the uncanny.

Fahlström shows a heightened awareness of the uncanny not only when it comes to language, but also when it comes to fiction and real life, and he often used the uncanny to create his humorous, but at the same time defamiliarized and political art. “Life material” is a notion coined by Fahlström to cover his use of audio-visual material recorded or painted from real life or fiction, since whatever he heard or saw in the constant media flow at his home was used as building blocks in the creation of his art (see e.g. Hultberg 1998, 76–77).

Before moving on to the analysis of Fahlström’s poetry, radio plays and visual arts a brief discussion of Freud’s concept of das Unheimliche will be necessary.

DAS UNHEIMLICHE

Most of the areas discussed by Freud in his seminal essay “Das Unheimliche” (1919) are illustrated in the oeuvre of Fahlström. Today the notion of the uncanny is often used as a description of a vague feeling of displeasure or fear, in the way commented upon by Freud: “the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (Freud 1955, 219). Freud takes his point of departure in Friedrich von Schelling’s dictum: “Unheimlich’ is the name for everything that ought to have remained … secret and hidden but has come to light”, and narrows it down to belong to the familiar: “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1955, 224; 220). In his discussion of the etymology of the word, Freud points out that the German notion “Heimlich” takes two contrary meanings, primarily “familiar”, or in a straight translation “homelike”, and secondly “secret”, where it

6. Freud’s discussion of the statement comes before he actually quotes Schelling, which may be the result of a certain anxiety of influence.
actually coalesces with the other pole of the dichotomy: “Unheimlich”. This ambiguity makes visible one of the main effects of that notion: the familiar always already contains the other, the not so familiar, and it is when this condition becomes visible we momentarily experience an uncanny effect/affect.

Freud anchors another important sense of the notion in “the return of the repressed”, which directly connects his ideas to Schelling’s definition, an experience that displays both the familiarity and strangeness behind the uncanny effect. Besides “the return of the repressed”, Freud enumerates several other sources of the uncanny such as the automaton, body parts, animistic thinking, repetition, ghosts etc., which are all connected to the human self.

The uncanny is such a difficult notion to define,7 as Freud’s essay amply illustrates, and it can thus be useful to refer back to Schelling’s earlier dictum. The advantage of this simple rule is that it makes us attentive to the elements of Fahlström’s oeuvre that are uncanny, and thereafter it is possible to deepen the analysis in the light of Freud’s, and other theorists’, more multilayered discussion.

Fahlström was very familiar with popular culture, and especially horror movies, which goes well with his interest in the uncanny. Here it is important to keep the fact that Fahlström lived from 1928 to 1976 in mind; it was a period when a lot of spaces that today are widely accepted, were not. His use of popular culture was therefore in many ways unconventional at the time. Low comedy, and especially the grotesque, links pornography and the scatological – two strata which Fahlström was extremely attentive towards – to the return of the repressed, and since the uncanny works in this way as well, it is nearly impossible to separate the uncanny from different low comic genres. The distance from fear to laughter appears to be very short, as Nicholas Royle points out; the uncanny is “never far from something comic” (Royle 2003, 2).

Such a long time has passed since Schelling introduced a specific meaning of the notion of the uncanny, and Ernst Jentsch, Freud, and others defined it, that the notion no longer seems to describe “what is frightening – […] what arouses dread and horror” (Freud 1955, 219), especially nowadays when we have become quite familiar with the experience of the uncanny from recent developments in popular culture and modern technology (for example TV). More than fear and anxiety, the uncanny today seems to evoke the milder feeling of displeasure or discomfort (feelings Freud opens up for later in his essay, which might indicate that his rather strict description was not accurate at the time of the essay either). This is yet another reason why I want to re-anchor the meaning of the notion in Schelling, since it is not based on the feeling of fear but on the fact that something that should have remained hidden has been revealed (with Freud’s supplement of the familiar in mind) in exactly the same way that Royle does:

The uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has

---

7. Moreover, there are several theories about the uncanny, including that of Rudolf Otto, who relates it to his own notion of mysterium tremendum et fascinans, experienced when one confronts manifestations of the holy; and Martin Heidegger who connects it to the recognition that the ground of Dasein is nothing or nothingness. See Heidegger (1977) and Otto (1922).
come to light. But it is not “out there”, in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality. It may be that the uncanny is a feeling that happens only to oneself, within oneself, but it is never one's “own”: its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world “itself”. It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself as a foreign body, the very estrangement of inner silence and solitude. (Royle 2003, 2, emphasis added in first sentence)

Royle connects the modern crisis of the borders between inside/outside to the uncanny, which is discussed as something interior rather than exterior. The uncanny is the familiar within oneself that momentarily is realized as unfamiliar, and therefore the experience when one reacts to events in reality as well as in fiction has deep roots in one's own identity. This internationalisation of the external, which is a result of the transgressed border between inner and outer, reveals something important when it comes to explain Fahlström’s heightened awareness of the uncanny.

**POETRY**

The first poem in “The Trumpet in the Bottom” (1949), entitled “Stum nick” (Mute nod), commences: “nowadays it is common to fold down the foreskin over the jacket collar not to get so hot around the neck”, and continues in the same Surrealist vein. The poetic image is created in the oneiric logic of Surrealism, where one substitutes a token with something completely different to create an unexpected metaphor. The quote is both grotesque and uncanny, and moreover shows, as I have argued elsewhere, how Fahlström uses material that should have remained hidden, namely “the inferior parts of the human body, i.e. the sexual organs and digestive system” as a means in his art (Bäckström 2007, 79, my translation). The effect was even stronger than today at the end of the 1940s, when sexuality was more “repressed” in high art. Nonetheless, it is certainly manifest in the uncanny of popular culture, as well as in the grotesque, the carnivalesque and popular humour, areas from which the uncanny retrieves its effect. His titles often underscore the uncanny, either when they contradict the written or when they give a precision that strengthens the uncanniness of the artwork. Here the title “Mute Nod” at the same time diverges from the poem, and introduces a feeling of uncertainty and alienation, since such a greeting might very well be given in respect, in anger, or as a threat.

In his early poems, Fahlström uses uncanny elements in a true Surrealist manner, and the effect of this is most often only one of many in the experience of the whole poem. I will discuss a longer quote from the poem “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”:

> The caterpillars have rolled out of my head and have thrown themselves on the burning hayrick in despair  
> they rear up in praying  
> that the digestive system  
> genitals false teeth and false beards  
> along with brains
have to be stored in the aquarium
well separated from and inaccessible to the owners
and be foddered by antisepically educated nurses
Tanneries for the production of fuse cords in the backbone of soldiers
admit that a small wind-driven generator in the back of the neck
should speed up the detonation
that a telephone should be installed in the head
with the dial in the mouth and a machine embroidered pillowcase between the legs

This passage, taken from a poem that continues on for some pages, exemplifies two uncanny features identified by Freud: body parts and the automaton (Freud 1955, 226; 244). The stochastically mentioned body parts in the first part of the quote, and the enumeration of different extensions of the bodies of soldiers in the second, like fuse cords, wind-driven generators and a telephone installed in the head in the next part, might be experienced as either uncanny or grotesque by the reader. The poetical imagery here illustrates the difficulty in separating the uncanny from other effects and means, but at the same time it becomes clear that the oneiric and nightmare qualities of the passage makes it tend more towards the uncanny than the grotesque. This illustrates how closely the grotesque and the uncanny effects are related; the main difference is that the use of separated body parts in the grotesque remains comical at the same time as it has a cathartic effect, while the uncanny use primarily gives rise to fear or discomfort.

Fahlström’s concrete period connects to the uncanny in more than one way, which I will show in an analysis of a poem written in the first half of the 1950s and published together with his Manifesto in Odyssé 1954. His use of words as things can clearly be seen in one of his most experimental poems – “MOA (1)”, which looks more like a musical score than a poem. The title introduces an uncertainty which leans toward the uncanny, since the reader while trying to interpret its meaning, soon realizes that what looks familiar is unfamiliar – there is no possible interpretation without a knowledge of what Fahlström meant by this portmanteau: “MOA” is an acronym for Milieu–Object–Action. The last part of the poem follows here in facsimile (Fahlström 1966, 47):

9. (Hultberg 1999, 97, endnote 27). “MOA (1)” was later published together with other poems written at the same period, a decade later in Bord – diktter 1952–55 (Table – poems 1952–55, Fahlström 1966). “Bord” in Swedish translates into “table” in English, but is actually a portmanteau for the Swedish words “bokstäver” (letters) and “ord” (words), which means that the translation does not catch the complexity intended.
In his reconfiguration of language, he alternates between three different ways of using words: in their ordinary meaning, with a new meaning and as short letter codes given a specified meaning. Words are underscored, cut to pieces and printed in the wrong direction, if we adhere to ordinary reading habits. The scatological footnote: “farts that sit on the wall in the form of swelling or flat brown blisters”, gives the poem a new dimension, since it introduces a feeling of something nightmarish and uncanny. The poem slowly accelerates into uncanniness, since the hermeneutic process is constantly disrupted by the repetition of new words and letter agglomerations with a specified meaning, leaving the reader alienated. Some of these shortcuts are even in themselves repetitions, like the letters “dd” which stands for “slowly”. Fahlström’s insistence on the materiality of language as a means to create the poetical effect results here among, other things, in an uncanny experience. As with the title of “MOA (1)”, Fahlström’s insistence on the materiality of language nullifies the interpretation of semantic meaning, since the reader understands that the only ‘meaning’ is the event of the poem. It is thus important to shift focus from the material elements of the poem over to what these elements do; the poem is not a thing, but an event.10 Indeed, Fahlström reveals the unfamiliar in the familiar, in his use of different alienation effects. Many of the effects are, furthermore, made possible by new technology, with its potential for creating interrupted speech and unstable meaning.

**RADIO COMPOSITIONS**

Fahlström started out as an author, but he soon turned to other art forms such as visual arts, performances, happenings, film, and not least radio plays or compositions. Strategies of games and play remained in focus in everything he did, as when he created three new

10. “[A]rt is not a work of something (a construction or an artifact) but rather […] ‘the act of putting it there’ – an event rather than (strictly) an object, which is what characterizes so much of the American art world since the 1950s, where, in the spirit of Duchamp and John Cage, *performance trumps composition*” (Bruns 2006, 109, my italics).
languages from bird sounds and sound effects in comics: fåglo, birdo and whammo. He used his new language “fåglo”, for example, as the base for his radio composition Fåglar i Sverige (Birds in Sweden, 1963), and in his second radio play Den helige Torsten Nilsson (The holy Torsten Nilsson, 1966), he used “life material” recorded from real life, TV, movies and other popular culture.

His method was to put an interesting mix of “life material” together, crossing the border between fiction and life, since his material came from a broad variety of sources, thus mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar in an uncanny way. Firstly, a number of real life people are used as characters in the play: the prime minister-to-be of Sweden, Olof Palme; Swedish sociologist, politician and Nobel prize-winner Alva Myrdal; the Swedish crown prince Carl Gustaf, and so on.11 Secondly, he thus constitutes contemporary Sweden as a future utopia, as described in the synopsis on the back of the book (Fahlström 1968):

A novel about Sweden in a utopian future of “risk reforms”. In which the politicians have nevertheless kept their hold, and their power games are driving society and the individual towards destruction.

Bisociations. Future, fiction – and the past, the document, the antiquated sound-items – freely overlapping in a hallucinatory roller coaster. (Hultberg 1999, 173–174)

When Fahlström claims that his contemporary society and politics belongs to a utopian future, the statement confuses the familiar and the unfamiliar, and therefore becomes uncanny for the reader when s/he realises that the contemporary society is utopia – the reading really becomes “a hallucinatory roller coaster”. Bisociation is a notion that Fahlström borrowed from Arthur Koestler. Fahlström explains it as follows: “you have piece A and come across another piece, B, and the sparks fly wildly when the two are rubbed together” (Hultberg 1999, 166). Fahlström’s blend of real life and recorded elements from fiction and TV brings to mind Freud’s comment on animism: “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on” (Freud 1955, 244). Fahlström’s idiosyncratic use of recorded sounds conforms to Freud’s comment, where not only the symbol takes the role of the symbolised, but reality becomes a symbol as well.

I will discuss “Lasern” (the Laser), the second of the radio play’s 35 chapters, in which a voiceover in Swedish is interlaced with recorded sounds. The voice introduces the “story” or plot of the radio play, while the recorded sounds add effects and feelings to the story. The main part of Fahlström’s manuscript has been published in his book Den helige Torsten Nilsson (1968), and even though much of the uncanniness of this heterogeneous radio composition lies in the experience of the auditory, the printed text also gives rise to it. This longer quote exemplifies the uncertainty that Fahlström provokes, where both his elliptical style and the fragmentary narrative works together to expose the unfamiliar in the familiar:

11. Torsten Nilsson was the Swedish foreign minister between 1962 and 1971, but does not figure in the play.
Ö.F. intensely: “There the ray was the little flickering laser spot – not much bigger than a penny – hmm, it’s dark and quiet. No one seems to live in the cottage – No… What was that? There’s something moving – someone –… in the dog house?”

*Behemoth* (American horror movie from 1959). Dogs barking, more and more fiercely, rapid footsteps, fateful tooting music intones, barking and steps. Steps. Barking – – the roar of animals, the music grows louder – and with it a strong electronic whining noise: *tchwaitchwaitchwaitchwaitchaitchwai tchwaitchwaitchaitchwaitchaitchwait*.

Ö.F.: “A dog… no, it’s a monkey, a chimpanzee I think – it’s disappearing into the house. What’s happened to laser spot? It’s got to be – yes, over the dog house!”

**THE ELECTRIC ARC** theme’s howling curve and gurgle. Continues behind:

Ö.F.: “What was it Palme was thinking?… or rather sort of quoting in his thoughts: a line – a straight line from a point exactly above Peking!”

**THE MYSELF** theme (From *Tyrant of Lydia*, an Italian-American TV series about adventures from the classical period). Ominous music, the clatter of horses’ hooves, and above it all, Ö.F. yells (with echo effect): “MYSELF!” Horses’ hooves clatter, horses snort, riders dismount; music: consuming, escalating. A woman, affectionately: “I’ll never forget this, Tamitsa”. In over her Ö.F.: “MYSELF!” Woman: “May the gods go with you!” Music, dignified, protracted brass fanfare themes. The clatter of riders come nearer again. Man, sternly: “There she is!” Horses’ hooves move from trot to gallop. Weaker, further away, an echoing Ö.F.: “MYSELF!” Long, sad notes in the French horns above the hooves. Heavy, fateful blasts from the rest of the orchestra – above it we hear a young woman very close, panting, steps, resigned moaning: “Oh – ohh ih – oh...” Horses snort. Woman: “Oh, ohh…!” Riders dismount. Soldier’s voice: “There she is, my Lord”. (translation in Hultberg 1999, 265–266)

Fahlström most often took his sources from popular culture, and the bisociation of life material in the quoted passage clearly gives rise to an uncanny effect/affect. After reading this passage, it becomes clear that he did not only take much of his material from horror movies, but also uses the logic and narrative from them. His elliptical and fragmentary style creates moments of suspense in the text, inducing a state of confusion and alienation in the audience, since it distorts the border between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The first part of the excerpt, with dogs’ barking and other sounds, comes from the 1959 American horror movie *Behemoth*, and the second part from the Italian-American TV-series *Tyrant of Lydia*. These sources are closely linked to the uncanny. Popular culture, and especially horror, is at the forefront in the investigation of the uncanny as horror culture grew out of it (Masschelein 2011, 148). Secondly, as Masschelein notes, the uncanny effect/affect can also arise from sound, even though it is usually connected mainly to the visual (Masschelein 2011, 135). In Fahlström’s radio composition the sounds from horror mov-

---

12. The film Fahlström refers to is probably film number nine – *The Tyrant of Lydia vs the Son of Hercules* – in the American TV-series *The Sons of Hercules* in the 1960s, which repackaged fourteen Italian films based on Greek mythology.
13. Freud, for example, is only interested in the visual (Royle 2003, 45).
ies taken out of their context illustrate her statement perfectly; the material in itself is clearly uncanny when it is taken out of context.

VISUAL ART

Even though we find the use of the uncanny throughout the whole of Fahlström’s oeuvre, it is in the visual arts it becomes most prominent. Here he uses a vast range of uncanny “life material” from real life and popular culture, a method not previously commented upon in the research on Fahlström.14

In Fahlström’s visual art one finds a systematic use of elements that are uncanny.15 I will examine four artworks by Fahlström, where his use of popular culture in relation to the uncanny becomes clear. He often worked with a mixed media technique, where he included movable parts combined with game rules and strategies, with the intention of involving the audience in the creation of the artwork.16 The first of four such artworks I want to discuss is Planetarium from 1963, which exists in different variations and techniques, but where the primary version is a diptych with two paintings, which at the same time is a collage with movable parts.

Under the figures there is a rope with hangers painted, where the movable clothes can be positioned. Finally, movable words are to be found on the smaller painting, words that according to game rules are played in order to move the clothes on the hangers onto the figures, so that they can all be dressed.

14. To mention but a few important works on Fahlström focusing his use of materiality, Antonio Sérgio Andrade Bessa in his dissertation Concretism in the Work of Öyvind Fahlström 2003, reworked into the book Öyvind Fahlström. The Art of Writing 2008, discusses the influence of Stéphane Mallarmé’s materiality on Fahlström in relation to the Brazilian movement. In Ord & Bild’s theme issue on Fahlström 1998, none of the authors discuss the uncanny. Jesper Olsson (2005) has, in his dissertation about concrete poetry, promoted a view on Fahlström as belonging to a materialist tradition from antiquity until today, and demonstrated this with bravura, but do not refer to neither the uncanny nor Sigmund Freud’s influential ideas about the phenomena (there is a reference to Freud only once, but then about the subconscious, see p. 197 footnote 169). What has not been asked by him, and other researchers, though, is the follow-up question that I find highly relevant to ask: why does Fahlström promote materiality in his manifesto? This question makes it possible to shift focus from the preoccupation with the means of Fahlström’s poetical method, finally to try to see the aim of his manifesto: its insistence on processesuality and performativity. This is something I have explored in a range of articles (see especially Bäckström 2009; Bäckström 2011), a range to which this article should be added. Olsson further makes, in a roundabout way of reasoning, use of the aesthetics of the later language poet Charles Bernstein, which, even though this anachronistic method produces interesting results, becomes problematic, especially when he does this without conceptualising Fahlström (for this critique, see also his opponent at the dissertation: Ørum 2005). Bengt Emil Johnson and Lars Hjelmstedt, for example, both demonstrate the importance of discussing Fahlström’s texts without any preconceived theories, in the previously mentioned issue of Ord & Bild 1998, when they in their interesting articles firmly conceptualise his texts in the time of their conception.

15. This can also be seen if one compares Fahlström’s use of life material to the material section of the catalogue to the exhibition The Uncanny, since it reminds the reader of Fahlström’s material cut-ups from fiction and real life (Kelley 2004); like in Masschelein’s observation about the uncanniness of “dolls, wax figures, body parts, skulls, and monsters from horror comics” (Masschelein 2011, 148).
This painting relies on repetition, and, along with the numerous figures in bizarre positions, this heightens the sense of the uncanny. Freud discusses the compulsion to repeat, and concludes: “whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny” (Freud 1955, 238). Fahlström’s repetition of slightly different figures in this painting works as an alienation of the already known or familiar. Even though the naked bodies will paradoxically be concealed once again when one dresses them according to the game rules, and the repressed becomes hidden, the painting remains uncanny due to the repeated number of figures in frozen positions. *Planetarium* also echoes Freud’s thoughts about the relationship between both the automaton and dolls and the uncanny. The large

---

16. It is debatable if the final artworks really activated the audience, though, since the artist himself often pre-fixed the movable parts at different shows. In my view, it is probable that Fahlström wanted to include the audience, since this idea was part and parcel of the aesthetics of the 1960s, but that it was often impossible due to exhibition restraints.

17. This is one of Fahlström’s artworks where the whole effect also includes an uncanny experience, even though this is only one of many aspects of *Planetarium*. The uncanny effect/affect does of course not exclude other effects and interpretations; on the contrary, the uncanny is characterized by its impurity and folded into different genres and other effects.
number of lifeless figures suspended in movement induces a strong feeling of uncanniness, when Fahlström re-contextualises a child’s dollhouse into an artwork for adults.

Another example is the collage *Green Power* from 1969, which is a large collage or composition. A huge wooden frame (2.3 x 1.55 meters) is filled with plastic green leaves and exotic fruits attached to a wire mesh, and some figures and other objects are mounted on top of the green leaves and fruits. Behind the wire mesh are some wild animals, including a snake and what is most likely some species of cat. Most of the figures allude to the uncan-
niness of colonialism and capitalism, as, for example, the only repeated object: a banana, which undoubtedly refers to the contemporary exploitation of the third world by United Fruit. The bananas and other exotic fruits in the green lushness give the impression that the collage depicts a tropical paradise, at the same time as the interjected figures refer to a world order where the rich countries control and exploit the countries of the third world.

I want to discuss one particular figure in *Green Power*. This is the morbidly obese man riding on a sad panther in the lower half of the painting. The inclusion of this man in the collage is in itself uncanny, since the man is only dressed in what appear to be the socks of a little girl, in this way confusing male and female, toddler and adult. In real life, this is a photo of “Happy Jack” Eckert, a circus artist appearing in sideshow acts as “the world’s fattest man”, whom Fahlström painted blue and superimposed on a panther.18 In the context

18. *Palm Beach Post*, March 10, 1937, source withdrawn from Google Books after I read it 9 May 2015. The picture and epithet is possible to find via Google, though, and plentiful of other material on and about him, as well. The newspaper is also available online at Newspapers homepage, but as a pay service: <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/133412494/> (read 12/01/17).
of the collage as a whole, the picture might be interpreted politically as an emblem of the exploitation of the third world by the perverted (fat) Western world; the image forms a culture–nature dichotomy in which Happy Jack represents the return of the repressed and therefore further enhances the exploitation. As something that should have remained hidden (the nude, obese body of the greedy Western oppressor), this element certainly is uncanny. Furthermore, as well as Happy Jack riding on a red panther, the title Green Power clearly refers to the Black Panthers, a political movement that was at its strongest in 1969. The title underscores the uncanniness of politics, since the “green power” depicted at a closer look reveals itself as completely devoid of power, infiltrated by capitalism as the lush greenery is.

The next work *Cold War* was created between 1963 and 1965, a collage with a large number of movable parts, in which the artwork was supposed to be rearranged at each exhibition. The title reminds us of the uncanniness of politics and war (Masschelein 2011, 136), an uncanniness which was severely heightened during the 1960s, when one could not be sure about what was familiar or unfamiliar, real or unreal. The artwork is a large diptych (2,44 x 1,52 meters each), in which a frame is sketched in the upper left corner, with a middle neutral zone, and a few additional elements. The main part of the collage, though, is the movable parts which can be rearranged by the painter or, hypothetically, by the audience (as an artwork in a museum, the parts are fixed, or rearranged by a curator only). Fahlström’s intention was that all his art with movable parts should reflect the contemporary socio-
political situation, and therefore the arrangement had to be reorganized each time. The material in the collage is taken from different sources, scaled, adapted and incorporated into the artwork as painted versions. This is not a collage in the sense of the historical avant-garde, since, for example, the work of Kurt Schwitters mainly incorporated objet trouvés, whereas Fahlström’s found objects were remediated before they became parts of the artwork; he painted them from different original sources and then used the result in the collage. He has taken different objects and put them together into the collage to form a larger whole. The result is not necessarily uncanny, but several individual pieces have been chosen because they are uncanny, either in themselves – as for example the repetition of rats in the mid-right part of the segment, or the blue part with a small man in a frightening landscape – or by the cropping done by Fahlström – as a double head, a screaming mouth and a head under a water tap. Fahlström’s method of using body parts might, as discussed earlier, result in both uncanny and grotesque effects, but here his use primarily gives rise to an uncanny feeling since the work is not in any sense comical.

My last example is taken from one of Fahlström’s collages with objects floating in water: *The Little General (Pin Ball Machine)* from 1967/68. This artwork consists of a large but shallow Plexiglas pool filled with water (1 x 2.8 x 5 meters), where several remediated objects float freely around, which means that they are usually collected in one corner of the pool if the audience has not puffed them apart. The similarities with a pinball machine are striking, since the objects float randomly, as with a pinball that goes in different directions according to the player’s use of the flippers, illustrating that life is uncontrollable. This alludes to the uncanniness of a puppet theatre, when one identifies with the impossibility of the string-bound puppets taking control, and where the title’s insistence on a “little general” makes the picture even uncannier. The movable parts were taken from different sources, in the same way as *Cold War*, and then transferred to vinyl with an oil-on-photo-technique. One does not experience an explicitly uncanny effect/affect in this collage, but it is possible to discern several uncanny elements, of which I will discuss three. These three different elements are taken from transgressive art photography, pornography and politics, and I will discuss the original found object in all three instances, and Fahlström’s reworking of them.

19. “While these elements (in my variable paintings) are physically definitive, they do not acquire any identity, any ‘content’, until they are combined in the painting. Their identity shifts with every rearrangement of the painting. […] The separate elements, then, are not small paintings in themselves but the machinery for making paintings. A picture organ” (Hultberg 1999, 46).
20. Or, more probably, his ex-wife Barbro Östlön painted the elements, since his interest was mainly conceptual (see Öhrner 2010).
21. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to achieve permission to reproduce *The Little General (Pin Ball Machine)* from the Öyvind Fahlström foundation, so to view this artwork see the Öyvind Fahlström foundation website <http://www.fahlstrom.com>, and (Davila 2001).
22. Fahlström’s intention was that the movable parts should float around by chance, and by this the arrangement would change over time, and also the audience was supposed to rearrange it in different ways, but this was almost immediately stopped since the parts proved to be too fragile. The height of one meter includes the stand.
23. If the generals of the cold war also were puppets, the thought is extremely alienating and therefore uncanny.
These three figures are either taken from popular culture and subculture, or photos showing an odd motif, and all exemplify how elements that were meant to remain hidden, when suddenly exposed, are experienced as uncanny. Fahlström used materials that are themselves uncanny; the first is a transvestite photographed by the internationally renowned Swedish photographer, Christer Strömholm. Since transvestites have traditionally been part of a hidden subculture in Europe, they are not supposed to ‘come into the light’, and furthermore the uncanny rises from the realisation of the unfamiliar in the familiar when one recognizes the instability of gender identities. In this photograph, the transvestite body becomes even more uncanny because female body parts have been removed from their ‘natural’ position and transferred to the ears. This transposition takes its inspiration from modern media, since the two displaced body parts remind the viewer of headphones.
A photo of Lyndon B. Johnson showing his surgical scar becomes highly uncanny because a president is a persona who represents the strength of her or his country, and when he displays the vulnerability of his naked body this is contradicted. The photograph also belongs to the tradition of *imitatio Christi* where one finds similar pictures depicting Christ himself or someone else pointing out, or even in, the spear wound on his left side. This visual reference to Christian iconography accentuates the uncanniness of the photograph.

24. We have today become more used to vulnerable presidents, after for example the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but at the time of Lyndon B. Johnson a president still represented the power of the nation.
Fig 7 Christ showing his wound to the doubting Thomas, choir sculpture in Notre-Dame de Paris, photo Lena Liepe.

These two figures have become even more uncanny in our posthuman age, since “aesthetic surgery, organ implants, transsexuals are all related to the uncanny” (Masschelein 2011, 149).
Pornography is part of popular culture but is regulated to a closed circuit and not traditionally exhibited as "high art". Fahlström’s incorporation of a photograph from a Danish pornography magazine with a masturbating girl, sitting restfully on a chair dressed only in an unbuttoned shirt, is uncanny in itself. She is simulating masturbation with her legs widespread, her face relaxed with an enigmatic smile on her lips, and her eyes directed upwards. The connection to the picture of president Johnson is uncanny, since where he points at his wound with the index finger, she points at her "wound" with her middle finger in a similar way. This image qualifies as a return of the repressed in a more precise meaning, since it not only belongs to pornographic discourse, but also reference the iconography of the ecstasy of female saints. It produces an even more uncanny effect/affect to those acquainted to the paragon, since it reveals what should have remained hidden. This becomes clear if one compares the “pornographic” photo that is used by Fahlström with pictures of saints like, for example, Teresa of Ávila and Catherine of Siena in divine ecstasy, the most famous of which is Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s sculpture Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1647–52) in Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome:
CONCLUSION

In this article, I have focused on Öyvind Fahlström’s use of material – from both real life and popular culture – that was uncanny. It is important to understand that Fahlström, even though he probably never read Freud’s essay, but rather discovered the uncanny through Surrealism, adheres to many of the aspects Freud discusses when it comes to the uncanny: body parts, dolls, the automaton in different apparitions, ghosts, repetition, and the return of the repressed. Fahlström’s material furthermore relates to the human or posthuman, a trait that Masschelein points out as specific for the uncanny:

A recurring element of the uncanny in the visual arts is the importance of the (human) figure. Be it in the form of dolls, waxworks, giants, robots, body parts, or the plastified corpses of Körperwelte, the human and the posthuman are at the center of the uncanny in the visual arts. (Masschelein 2011, 148)
Fahlström’s creative process reveals a remarkable sensitivity to the uncanny (das Unheimliche), and shows how he discerns what is at the same time familiar and secret (Heimlich) in reality and fiction, since his material often exemplifies the return of the repressed or details that one does not normally expose. When he includes these objects in his artworks, no matter if it is concrete poetry, radio compositions or visual arts, the uncanniness of his objects often – but not always – disappears and turns into a political dimension, like the obese man in Green Power, for example. This is a typical example of his method of “bisociation”, where one “strikes” two different objects against each other, and the result becomes something completely different in a genuine realisation of avant-garde aesthetics. His artworks become truly political not least through the uncanny objects included in them, since the uncanny effect/affection this provokes in each instance is clearly connected to the entire feeling of alienation one often experiences in front of his artworks, a feeling that displays “alienation as an economic, political, psychological, and existential condition” (Masschelein 2011, 136). Especially in his use of uncanny objects from popular culture, Fahlström was a pioneer in Western avant-garde art, continuing the work of the historical avant-garde and expanding it into a new dimension through his use of the repressed and what-should-have-remained-hidden. This made his artworks into political statements about human life and politics in his time and onwards, into the posthuman age of today.

REFERENCES