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Neil Badmington, Cardiff University  
Badmington@Cardiff.ac.uk

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# Hermaphrodite, Rosalba

Neil Badmington

Fellinis – two of them. Doubled.

First Fellini. Towards the end of *Satyricon* (1969), in an episode not found in Petronius, Encolpius and Ascyltus encounter Hermaphrodite in a temple in the desert. The pale figure reclines limply by a pool of water while afflicted visitors seek healing from the being whom they believe to be ‘full of magic’. Encolpius and Ascyltus stage a violent kidnapping and make their way through the desert with the demi-god hidden in a covered carriage. When they run out of water, Hermaphrodite dies of thirst.

Second Fellini. In *Casanova* (1976), again near the end of the narrative, the protagonist travels to Gothenburg and attends a wild party where he meets a life-sized mechanical doll named Rosalba. ‘One could swear she was alive’, says Casanova in a state of wonder. When the festivities are over, he finds Rosalba alone at the table. He speaks to her as if she were human. They dance. He moves her to a bed. ‘I would love to see you *au naturel*’, he says before having sex with the doll.

Roland Barthes claimed that he had a ‘[r]esistance to cinema’, but towards the end of his life he turned his attention to these two scenes from Fellini.<sup>1</sup> On 3 June 1978, in the last session of his course on the Neutral at the Collège de France, he opened a section entitled ‘The Androgyne’ in the following manner:

As always, things, when they are important [...] have a farcical version. The androgyne has its farcical version: the hermaphrodite → universally discredited. A monster: not terrifying, but worse: uncanny (recall the shot of the hermaphrodite in his baby carriage, in the sun, Fellini-*Satyricon*).<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, in the final pages of *Camera Lucida* (1980) Barthes called photography ‘a hallucination’ and then cut away abruptly to an anecdote about cinema:

I am trying to render the special quality of this hallucination, and I find this: the same evening of a day I had again been looking at

photographs of my mother, I went to see Fellini's *Casanova* with some friends; I was sad, the film exasperated me; but when Casanova began dancing with the young automaton, my eyes were touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity, as if I were suddenly experiencing the effects of a strange drug; each detail, which I was seeing so exactly, savoring it, so to speak, down to its last evidence, overwhelmed me: the figure's slenderness, its tenuity – as if there were only a trifling body under the flattened gown; the frayed gloves of white floss silk; the faint (though touching) absurdity of ostrich feathers in the hair, that painted yet individual, innocent face: something desperately inert and yet available, offered, affectionate, according to an angelic impulse of 'good will' ... At which moment I could not help thinking about Photography: for I could say all this about the photographs which touched me (out of which I had methodically constituted Photography itself). I then realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began by calling it: the pangs of love. Was I not, in fact, in love with the Fellini automaton?<sup>3</sup>

The signifier 'uncanny' appears rarely in the work of Roland Barthes; it is, so to speak, kept out of sight, perhaps because of what he called his 'undecided' relation' to psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup> It is novel and unfamiliar to see it surface in his discussion of *Satyricon*, then, but it is equally striking to find the term absent from his engagement with the scene in *Casanova* in which Giacomo dances with the mechanical doll. In Barthes, there is something uncanny about the uncanny.

On closer inspection, it is not quite clear what Barthes views as uncanny in *Satyricon*. He invites his audience specifically to 'recall the shot of the hermaphrodite in his baby carriage, in the sun'. This means that he cannot be thinking of the scene inside the temple, where there is no sun, but where, strangely, we encounter images which might conventionally be read as uncanny due to their staging of what Nicholas Royle has called 'a crisis of the proper': Hermaphrodite in a kind of cot that seems to be of the wrong size for such a body; Hermaphrodite neither dead nor fully alive; Hermaphrodite raised to reveal both penis and breasts; a mise-en-scène that often resembles a painting more than a moving picture.<sup>5</sup> Here, inside the temple, categories tremble in the face of an 'intellectual uncertainty', to use the phrase from which Freud recoils in his essay on the uncanny (U1: 230). But out in the sun, where Barthes lingers, I find little illumination. 'Recall the shot', insists Barthes – but *which* shot? From the moment of the abduction until the announcement of the demi-god's

death, there are no fewer than fifteen shots of the carriage, and Hermaphrodite is visible in nine of them. When Barthes asks us to 'recall the shot of the hermaphrodite', then, which shot does he mean? What aspect of it, moreover, strikes him as uncanny? It is impossible to answer these questions.

Things are no less enigmatic when we consider the analysis of *Casanova* in *Camera Lucida*. Why, above all, does Barthes avoid the term 'uncanny' when discussing the sequence involving Rosalba the automaton? Although Giacomo, unlike Hoffmann's Nathanael, is aware that the object of his desire is not human – he refers to her 'crazy inventor' at one point, for instance – the moment at which he dances with the doll recalls the scene in 'The Sandman' where we are told that a besotted Nathanael 'embraced the fair Olympia and flew with her through the ranks of the dancers' at Spalanzani's ball.<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous has proposed that Freud's reading 'pruned' Hoffmann's tale to leave the figure of the automaton in the realm of insignificance: 'Freud has no eyes for her', she writes.<sup>7</sup> I cannot look upon Barthes's lines about *Casanova* without wondering why he has no eyes for the uncanny when those very eyes are, he notes, 'touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity' as they watch Giacomo dance with an automaton.

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Barthes admitted that his engagement with psychoanalysis was 'not scrupulous'.<sup>8</sup> In his work we find no immaculate Freudian system – or even a sustained fidelity. And in his brief reckonings with Fellini the *unheimlich* is either unclear or absent from where it cries out to be named. The uncanny is an enigma in Barthes because it dances across his pages, spinning readers forever towards an elsewhere, another place.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 54; translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984), pp. 115-16; ellipsis in original. Fellini's automaton clearly made an impression on Barthes, for he also refers to it in *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 'I've said this elsewhere: the automaton in Fellini's *Casanova*: its make-up, how thin it is, the feather, the white gloves that don't quite fit, the way the arm moves too high' (p. 106). But wait... The lecture in which these words were spoken was given on 10 March 1979; according to the dates given at the end of the French edition of *Camera Lucida* (but omitted from the English translation), the book on photography was composed between 15 April and 3 June 1979. Barthes's 'I've said this elsewhere' is therefore puzzling: in March 1979 he had yet publicly to say this elsewhere or, by his own reckoning, even begin writing *Camera Lucida*. Elsewhere, where? Elsewhere, when? What is presented as known of old and long familiar seems, on closer inspection, to be anything but. It is likely that this uncanniness is a result of the complicated composition of *Camera Lucida* – a process, which, as Jean-Louis Lebrave explains in 'La Genèse de *La Chambre claire*' (*Genesis*, 19 [2002]: 79-107), led Barthes to draw upon notes written long before April 1979. Even so, there is something *unheimlich* about what is said to have been said elsewhere: the source is enigmatic; there is a crisis of the proper.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 150; emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, 'The Sandman', in *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, trans. by Richie Robertson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', trans. by Robert Denomé, *New Literary History*, 7.3 (1976): 534, 538.

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 150.

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