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Black Out

Abstract: This chapter concerns a child's fascination and fear at experiencing the theater for the first time, where the uncanny erupts and enthralls.

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First time at the theater

Faust is being played on stage. Not Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust, but the Historia and Tale of Doctor Johannes Faustus, the Sorcerer. Traditionally, dramatizations of the old folk tale are performed with hand puppets. But not this time. This time, it is being played by actors, by real flesh-and-blood people, on a small picture-frame stage.

It is an adaptation for children, and it is a full house. The show is nearly over. The church bell has already begun to toll midnight – the time has come, and soon the devil will get Dr. Faustus. Only a few more tolls of the bell – one, two –

The play is staged as a series of short chronological scenes telling the tale of Johannes Faustus: how he studied theology, then medicine and astrology; how he received his master's degree and his doctorate; and how his lust for life and his insatiable thirst for knowledge slowly and inexorably led him to become a conjuror and necromancer. The plot is as follows:

*After Faustus – together with some slap-happy revelers – has squandered his entire inheritance, he enlists the help of dark powers to conjure the devil at a crossing in the woods at midnight so that he might “have whatsoever his heart would wish or desire.”**

The magic works, and the devil actually appears. At his second appearance in Faustus's study, he agrees to serve Faustus and fulfill his worldly desires, under one condition: the wise and honorable Herr Doctor must give him his body and soul after a term of twenty-four years.

* Jason Colavito (ed.), *The Faust Book* (Albany: Jason Colavita, 2011), 63.

Faustus agrees. The pact is made and signed in blood.

The devil keeps his promise. The twenty-four years go by in no time for Faustus, surrounded by luxury and fantastical black magic. Now the time has come. The countdown has begun. Faustus's last hour is coming to an end. He cannot stop time. The clock is already striking midnight – one, two, three, four –

The staging is naive. No trace of the multimedia age. Nevertheless it exerts a pull, at least upon one young member of the audience.

Perhaps this child is a little too young for the performance. At any rate they have only vaguely understood the details of the story. But story or no story, it is completely clear that it is Faustus's fate to be enslaved to a demonic power for ever and ever. The child is vulnerable to the preternatural, the threat of calamity, vulnerable to that which comes over us when we are unprotected. The aura of the demonic repels and at the same time enthralls the young spectator, who is simultaneously scared and fascinated, pulled more and more into the History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus, as if it were a David Lynch movie. The distance to the stage shrinks, the events become more and more real, the figures gain factual existence.

The devil's first appearance in the midnight wood caught this naive audience member completely by surprise. Until that moment, the child had been watching guilelessly. Now the child waits breathlessly – as if also there with Faustus – for the devil's next appearance in the study. The adversary will arrive. Mephistopheles will show himself a second time to seal the agreed-upon pact. But when? When will it happen? When will it ultimately happen? And how?

Which guise will the devil take this time? Waiting is almost a form of torture.

Then, around noon, a shadow peeks from behind the wood stove – only a shadow, a harmless shadow, the kind all objects make when the sun shines upon them. But the sun does not shine inside the room. The sun is over the house, at its peak. The shadow grows, becomes larger and larger, overgrowing the furnishings and the walls. It presses on your chest, takes your breath away. It weighs a ton, even though there is nothing there. Nothing; just dark air – no weight, just a shadow, just black.

The child stares hypnotically at the stage. Why is the shadow coming from behind the stove, of all places! That is sneaky, that is mean! The incongruity of the wood stove that promises warmth and the monstrous darkness behind chills to the bone. The cozy wood stove is no longer a safe harbor. Its familiar comfort is an empty promise. A mean trick? A trap? When a shapeless hybrid monster with a human head suddenly jumps out of the shadow, the child's imagination is no longer able to distinguish between real and fictive events.

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When the child's eyes open again, instead of the human-headed beast, a monk in a grey cloak is standing there. A holy man of the cloth. A guarantor of good, who should bestow confidence. But the fear remains. It lingers. Has it been provoked by the knowledge that evil resides within the cloak in a terrible turn-around of holiness? Is it the mockery of God's omnipotence implicit in this manifestation of the devil, who by taking on the appearance of a monk has made himself sovereign over a perversion of the good? Is that what has crept into his bones and has become subcutaneously disturbing?

The child's belief in good, in the images of good passed down from generation to generation, is still intact, determined as it is by reliable experience. The earth carries us, the sun shines, you wake up every morning healthy and happy. Most of all, at home there is an unconditional hug always waiting to take you up and offer shelter. But it is not the inversion, the portrayal of evil in the sanctimonious mask of good that touches the child's deepest fear. That fear lies elsewhere.

There is a figure. But no face. Why is the monk hiding his face? What is lurking there? What is veiled in the obscurity of the pointed hood? – a hideous visage, a demon – or instead of a visage – uncanny and gloomy – nothing – simply nothing – if you would grasp at nothing. And your own hand moves toward it with a will of its own – at nothingness that grips you – toward which you are pulled – resistance is futile – pulled –

It is the blank space that makes the child come unstuck, the lacuna that bossily awakens the uncanny, being at the mercy of a faceless power that sees without being seen. "This spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it." Jacques Derrida calls this power of the specter the "visor effect."**

The floodgates of the imagination open, releasing non-stop images. It is bodily torture. Almost unbearable.

Faustus's final day has come. After a last meal for himself and his friends, he says goodbye and locks himself in his study. It is almost midnight. There's

* Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XVII. ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 218–252. Freud looks at meanings of the word "uncanny" (unheimlich) and contrasts them with meanings for the word "canny" (heimlich, heimelig).*

no escape. No safe haven in the eternal feminine, no arms to surround and protect. In this tale, only eternal damnation is waiting for Faustus. That is the horror, the perverseness of the idea of hell.

The church bell has begun to toll – it is almost midnight – one, two, three – at the last toll, at exactly twelve, Faustus’s soul will fall forever into hell – four, five, six – the chronology of the bell’s chimes is unstoppable; nothing can save him – seven, eight, nine – a thunderstorm breaks out in his study – a thunderstorm in a study? – desperate cries for help – ten, eleven, twelve.

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The child comes to, crouched in its seat, head down, arms wrapped around legs for protection, while the other children all around clap, scream and laugh.

* Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6. *Italics in the original.*



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