



Bartosz Zaskórski
**THE ŻYTNO CHAINSAW
MASSACRE¹**

If we look at the way the countryside functions in contemporary Polish culture, we can notice several dominant strategies. Many of them are associated with ‘processing’ one’s own rural roots, as if they were something to be ashamed of. After all, the pejorative term ‘peasant’ is something that hardly anyone finds shocking, no matter how open-minded they are... Another narrative is proposed in such books as Adam Leszczyński’s *Ludowa historia Polski* [The Folk History of Poland] or Kacper Pobłocki’s *Chamstwo* [Rabble]. It is a necessary one – however, it threatens to reduce the interest in the history of serfdom to a transitional fashion, with no influence on how the countryside and its inhabitants are perceived.¹ Therefore, I have an impression it is stories of ‘social class advancement’ – understood as escape from the countryside – and not the sense of attachment to rural reality that prevails in the sphere of culture.

But why would anyone want to flee the countryside? Is one sure that class contempt is the main reason here? Or is there something much more terrifying that lurks in the countryside? I want to approach this question in a subversive way and discuss the countryside as a space that has a much greater potential for arousing anxiety than the urban space. A place that is the gateway to the Freudian uncanny. Just like Lynch’s Twin Peaks. The eponymous village is surrounded by forests with a gateway to the Black Lodge, a passage into the world of strange and potentially sinister forces, awaiting an opportunity to invade our reality.

Let me begin by defining the phenomenon of the uncanny. The uncanny seems to appear (as a topic of inquiry) in European culture along with the disintegration of the Enlightenment narrative – when, on the one hand, earlier religion-based narratives became exhausted but, on the other hand, the new ones, referring to faith in reason, proved to be insufficient. Magic got removed from the world, but instead of strengthening people, breaking the spell brought them anxiety.² We owe one of the earliest descriptions of

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- 1 I take the liberty here to make a personal digression, related to my country background, although it is a material for a separate text. From among the peculiar comments I have met with in connection with my origin, I would like to quote some questions I was asked during interviews: ‘Do I think that people in the countryside are limited?’, ‘How does it feel to be from such a small village and exhibit in Zachęta?’. On another occasion, in a private conversation, I was asked how it was possible that my parents were from the countryside. ‘Were they sent there for punishment?’ I received all these questions from people who support and respect (and quite rightly so) religious and sexual minorities, however, due to a strange illness affecting the Polish intellectuals, this respect is not sufficient to prevent them from dehumanising the Polish countryside.
 - 2 Philosopher Ray Brassier, the author of *Nihil Unbound*, proposes a slightly different interpretation of this phenomenon. He claims that the Enlightenment Project did not fail, but, on the contrary, brought a new value to European culture; however,

the phenomenon of the *unheimlich*³ to Ernst Jentsch. In his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* from 1906, he wrote: ‘Among all the psychological uncertainties that can become a cause for an uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness.’⁴

I think that the wording ‘making itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness’ is important for the understanding of the uncanny. The uncanny is a subtle albeit significant impression, a feeling that something does not match, something has changed, although we do not know exactly what happened and what the oddity of the situation consists of. The uncanny is connected with mystery. Let us use, as an example, the situation when we go the same way to school or work; one day, we notice an element of landscape we have never seen before, for example a tree growing in a place where it has never been before. The senses tell us: there is a tree here, but memory denies it: no tree is supposed to be here. The tree itself is not strange, there is nothing strange about the existence of a tree in the landscape. But the tree is in a place where we do not remember it. So we ask a friend: Have you ever seen this tree? They say, ‘Yes, it’s always stood here’. We begin to doubt the power of our memory; we do not understand why we remembered this part of the landscape differently. Worse still, more people whom we ask confirm the existence of a tree in this place. After some time, we get used to seeing it, but the memory of this unclear situation remains. Depending on an individual’s sensitivity and ability to cope with what-should-not-be, the thought of a tree-never-seen-before can be quickly ignored, but it can also haunt a person for weeks to the extent that they find a way around it on their way to work. The need to deal with the uncanny, to transform the experience in such a

that value was inconsistent with the Enlightenment minds’ expectations.

Instead of presenting the cognised reality as reasonable and rational, it showed that if only rationalism is used – without referring to metaphysical instances – nothing can be determined about the purposefulness of the world. The mind was unable to discover any sense (in the metaphysical meaning) or to produce – as objective – any rational rules, e.g. in the form of morality.

3 It is worth adding that the Polish equivalent of the word ‘uncanny’ (*niesamowity*) is a Ukrainianism: ‘ukr., supposedly connected to the devil, impure, devilish; discomposed, slightly sick in the body and in the mind’, M. Arcta *Słownik ilustrowany języka polskiego*, 1916[M. Arct’s Illustrated Dictionary of the Polish Language], 1916.

4 E. Jentsch, *O psychologii niesamowitego*, transl. A. Żukrowska, ‘Autoportret’, 2014, No. 4, p. 32.

way that it can be incorporated into the order of everyday life, is dictated by the need to preserve the sense of the integrity of the world.

In his work, Jentsch analyses the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, to which Sigmund Freud will also refer – the latter is also credited with conceptualising the idea of the uncanny. Hoffmann's work not only treats about contact with the Uncanny, it arouses this very uncanniness in the reader. However, Freud criticised Jentsch's work, trying to create his own taxonomy of the Uncanny and reducing this phenomenon to the psychological scope. Freud's goal is to explain the uncanny, and therefore to tame it.

However, as Nicholas Royle, the author of the book *Uncanny*, pointed out, capturing and describing the mechanics of the uncanny is, in a sense, doomed to failure. We can multiply examples of the uncanny, write subsequent pages on this topic, but we cannot exhaust the topic – that is, we cannot reduce it to a clear explanation covering the **entire** experience. Royle describes it using the example of Freud's essay; the Viennese psychoanalyst, trying to distance himself from the described phenomenon, maintains the attitude of a rationalist – a person whom the uncanny does not affect because the methodology protects him from the irrational. He therefore tries to reduce the experience of the Uncanny to a simple psychological phenomenon that can be managed thanks to psychoanalysis. Freud tries to create an exhaustive taxonomy of the phenomenon – to devise a **safe** concept stretching from here to there, which does not have the strange power to control anything, which can be easily exorcised – by bringing it to one of many issues of psychological or, as the psychoanalyst prefers, aesthetic nature. He wants to control what is intrinsically out of control. However, according to the author of *Uncanny*, Freud gets defeated.

This does not mean, however, that nothing can be said about the Uncanny. However, there is one thing to be remembered when studying this topic. Any text that tries to get to grips with the theme of the Uncanny will itself become haunted by it. Regardless of the author's efforts, the Uncanny, referring to **everything** that is beyond control, that remains unnamed, repeated, recurring against one's will, contradicting the sense of familiarity and the idea of what is normal – thus, everything that should remain hidden – eventually overgrows and devours every effort made to characterise this phenomenon. In this sense, the uncanny remains fully resistant to the attempt to include it in the routine of everyday life, of what is normative, formatted, permanently placed in the order of things: in models, systems, in the framework of ordinary life.

Of course, there is no doubt that people who live anywhere do it: they care for the integrity of the vision of the world. I do not want to romanticise living in the countryside (romanticising is just another strategy of a bourgeois who strives to make the countryside a recognised and danger-free

phenomenon). I do not want to draw a heroic picture of the human types we will encounter outside the city (as we will encounter different ones, cruel and sensitive, as everywhere). However, in comparison with the countryside, it is precisely the city that provides a whole range of means of isolation from what constantly tries to break into our world, our idea of the world. It supports, effectively, the reenchantment of the world, enveloping it with stories that convince that the world is an ordered place. Of course, it may happen that, in the city, we'll see something that will cause us anxiety – for example, a tram that has just run over a passer-by – but it will be precisely the intrusion of what I am going to call the real in the further part of the text, into an ordered world of ideas mistaken for reality.

And although urban reality infects rurality – social media is the ultimate way to drown out anxiety, manage terror – the very structure of the rural reality: isolation, proximity to nature, much darker night – exposes us to the works of the Black Lodge.

A good illustration of this state of affairs – the technique of survival of the continuous company of the uncanny in secluded places – is the initial scene from the film *An American Werewolf in London* (1981, dir. John Landis). Two stray tourists, big city boys from the US, get lost in the moors in Scotland. However, before they encounter the Uncanny (here, in the form of imagined horror: a werewolf), which will change the life of one of them, they will find themselves at a local inn. The locals, crowded inside, talk loudly, laugh, drink. They forget the impenetrable darkness outside, the monstrosities that roam in it. It is only the intrusion of two townspeople looking for adrenaline – but also deeply convinced that nothing bad ever happens, or at least not to them – that spoils the mood, reveals the fears in 'superstitious peasants'. However, it is these 'simple' people who know that there are things to be avoided out there in the darkness. A bourgeois, and especially an intellectual one, who has cultural capital, cannot listen to them, otherwise he would consent to the destruction of his idea of the world. The boys, instead of staying at the inn, set off into the night – one of them will pay for it with his life, and the other one will turn into a beast.

The uncanny – in the context of rurality – also appears in the work of Thomas Bernhard. On the one hand, the writer often describes a certain ordinary everyday life; on the other hand, he reveals its strangeness and incoherence. He writes: 'The uncanny? It is an evening, always multidimensional darkness between the rocky walls.' His novel *Gargoyles* contains a description of experiencing the Uncanny. The whole story is about a municipal doctor and his son who visit one patient after another. However, there is something that haunts these men's ordinary life; beneath the surface of conventions and the ordinary, there is something unspeakable hiding. At some point, the heroes arrive at a cove where a mill stands. The sun never reaches the cove. Behind the mill, one of its inhabitants keeps

a cage in which exotic birds live. However, the inhabitant died and the birds, left unattended, scream continuously. The miller's sons, together with the Turkish immigrant he employed, decide to put an end to the turmoil by killing the birds. They twist their necks. The sight of dead birds in an absurd cage, in this place among the rock walls, arouses a sense of the presence of the Uncanny in the doctor's son.

That absurd, exaggerated act of cruelty can be recognised as a reflection of urban, intellectual fears associated with the countryside. The countryside haunted by the Uncanny. Such clues, fear or a sense of affinity of the countryside with darkness, appear regularly in the cinema, as exemplified by the *backwood horror* genre. In countless films of this genre, the countryside turns out to be a place that has lost its fight against the darkness. Where what is inhuman, anti-human, not only is the background and potential, but prowls actively. The Uncanny has consumed the inhabitants; what is more, it will devour every other person who ventures into these areas. According to this current, it is precisely in villages, as in Lovecraft's stories, that deformed, sick and, above all, cruel individuals live. They threaten the **ordinary life**, violate the structures of ideas about the world, about what should be. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, Tobe Hooper), although it is an absolutely outstanding and unique work on the map of horror cinema, intensifies this image to the very end: we meet a **rural** family whose most talented descendant, Leatherface, spends his time creating furniture and gadgets made of human skin.

Another perspective can be found in the story *The Black Spider* by Jeremias Gotthelf. The story begins with a wedding in a country cottage. One of the guests asks the host why in the centre of a nice, well-maintained home there is a wooden pole that looks as if it had been pulled out of a fire. It is ugly and makes the place look ugly too, causing a vague anxiety. The host tells the story – the story of an unsuccessful trade with the devil: the villagers tried to cheat the devil who began to appear in various places as a black spider, bringing death. Finally, he was defeated – there were some victims – and locked in a hollowed-out pole in a newly built house. The pole turned black, but effectively trapped the beast inside. An act of absolute heroism: living in the immediate company of the Uncanny, or rather pure evil, the infernal spider closed **forever** in a part of the house, something that reminds at any moment of how close the darkness, the Uncanny, is.

The uncanny character of rural space is therefore associated with the lack of certain stimuli, with darkness. According to Nicholas Royle, the author of the aforementioned *Uncanny*, darkness is a paradoxical issue. It is not the darkness itself that is the source of the uncanny, but what it reveals, what is extracted from the darkness by the light. The uncanny is what comes from darkness, what should remain hidden, inaccessible to cognition. What the rational, friendly light draws out of the darkness may reveal as uncanny.

The situation of seeing a bolt of lightning at night is amazing: for a moment, an electric discharge illuminates the area where we found an uncertain shelter. For a fraction of a second, we see strange figures standing near our hideout. People wandering the moors in such a weather? Impossible. We do not know what we actually saw: was it a broken tree, or is there actually someone there? If so, then who or what? Royle quotes Paul de Man: ‘Making the invisible visible brings about the uncanny.’

At night in the city, only some places are really dark, but all the rest are lit. And although the streets can still hide danger, they **do not suggest it** – everything can be seen clear as daylight; one can succumb to the illusion that there are no secrets around. Nothing is bothering us. You can get so used to it that you don’t respond to a call for help from the street. Living in such a space must cause discomfort, but, following the lead of the terror management theory, created by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Thomas Pyszczynski, this discomfort is the price one has to pay for isolating oneself from unpleasant thoughts.

The nights in the countryside are darker, the darkness is harder to penetrate, and unpleasant thoughts are more poignant. Andrei Platonov’s anti-utopian novel *The Foundation Pit* brings a specific idea for the management of such a space: the protagonists visit a place where the houses face one another, and the windows are so large that everyone can be seen by everyone. People look at one another and make sure that no troublesome thoughts bother us.

It is not only the darkness that induces an inquisitive mind to analyse the strange shapes seen near against the wall of the forest. Rural landscape, proximity to nature, excessive covering or exposure of the terrain. Of course, the villages are very varied – those located in the depths of the forest (like my native one) are different from those surrounded by flat farmland stretching all the way to the horizon. The former type brings mystery, the latter can activate agoraphobia.

The phenomenology of darkness interacts most strongly with silence; it is silence that strengthens the influence of darkness; both intertwine to form a synergistic pair. The mechanics of silence is similar to the mechanics of darkness, and the uncanny expresses itself in them in a similar way. Just as the darkness itself is not frightening, but what might be hidden in it is – the silence in itself is not as dangerous as the possibility of hearing something that will violate it. Nicolas Royle, in *Uncanny*, points out the death drive, which ‘works unnoticed’, remains mute, silent, pursues its goals independently of our attention. Freud, in an essay from 1919, holds his place when it comes to the death drive (the concept will not appear until a year later in the text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). Nevertheless, the topic, although not yet named, crawls somewhere in the background, above the psychoanalyst’s thought, regardless of his will:

‘But the death drive lurks, as if forbidden to speak its name, everywhere in the 1919 essay.’⁵ This is also an amazing, special feature of the death drive, which always works in a living being, but remains hidden and silent. This is precisely what the silence seems to be – unlike the hustle, it gives space not only to real (or not) auditory experiences, but also to all kinds of horrible thoughts and imaginations. Just like in the aforementioned novel *The Foundation Pit*, the authors of the terror management theory claim that: ‘Of the four most important existential problems that absorb people – freedom, bonds with other people, the meaning of life and death, the latter is particular. The first three are the object of desires, while death is the only one that arouses fear. It is a special kind of fear not only because it is strong, and sometimes even overwhelming, but also because (at least potentially) it is still present, unavoidable, and extremely difficult to remove. It is easy to see that the fear of death only actualises under certain conditions, but when it does, it becomes a source of suffering. No wonder that death is an eternal theme in literature or painting, that it is the central category of many religious systems, as well as numerous superstitions.’⁶

Silence and darkness remind us of the ultimate and inevitable: death and suffering. However, it is the proximity of nature that reveals an important feature of reality: the quantity and multitude of forms of suffering around us. Perhaps urban space isolates us from the images of suffering, drowning them out with ubiquitous noise, excessive stimuli, light.

Perhaps in the process of building cultural capital, gaining social advancement, we distance ourselves, conjure certain areas of our sensitivity using art, music, literature. We learn to be efficient machines – and preferably pleasure machines (setting themselves a goal of maintaining pleasure), machines that capably avoid worries. The space of the city supports it – but also excites, overstimulates. Both the American horror writer Thomas Ligotti and the German philosopher and neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger point out a peculiar intellectual aversion to dealing with the subject of suffering – inevitably inscribed, after all, in the fact of being alive.

In the countryside, the amount of suffering in the surrounding world becomes much more noticeable. It is hard to hide from it. From dogs howling at night, sometimes tied to chains, to cows covered with flies biting them, to all nature itself – an invasive species of snails eating chicks from nests just under the eyes of parents who cannot recognise danger. Wasps laying their eggs inside caterpillars; the hatching larvae will slowly devour

5 N. Royle, *Uncanny*, s. 86.

6 P. Aries, *Człowiek i śmierć*, transl. E. Bąkowska, Warszawa 1989, quoted from: W. Łukaszewski, J. Boguszewska, *Strategie obrony przed lękiem egzystencjalnym*, ‘Nauka’, 2008, No. 4, <http://www.nauka-pan.pl/index.php/nauka/article/view/403/397> [accessed 1 May 2022].

the host from the inside. It is enough to go to a forest or a meadow in spring to experience what Werner Herzog talked about in the documentary *Burden of Dreams* (1982): ‘The trees here are in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don’t think they – they sing. They just screech in pain. It’s an unfinished country. It’s still prehistorical. The only thing that is lacking is – is the dinosaurs here. It’s like a curse weighing on an entire landscape. (...) We have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication... Overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order.’⁷

However, instead of going to the jungle, it is enough to go to the countryside and enter a forest. For a bourgeois, the countryside is something as foreign, wild, hostile, and exotic as a jungle – although the horror of rural space remains generally unspoken and unnamed. Nature is chaotic and therefore potentially dangerous. Even inconspicuous plants conceal a desire to kill. Silent trees fight – some of them rob others of light. Mushrooms work in silence, processing the mass of dead matter. In a way, the hero of Sartre’s *Nausea* talks about it, who recognises the threat to the city: ‘When the town dies, the Vegetation will invade it, it will clamber over the stones, it will grip them, search them, burst them open with its long black pincers; it will blind the holes and hang its green paws everywhere. You must stay in the towns as long as they are alive, you must never go out alone into that great mass of hair waiting at their gates: you must let it undulate and crack all by itself. In a town, if you know how to go about it, and choose the times when the animals are digesting or sleeping in their holes, behind the heaps of organic detritus, you rarely come across anything but minerals, the least frightening of all existents.’⁸

The city creates an insulating barrier from the outside using noise, human masses, and entertainment. Here is where the category of the Real comes to mind. The real constitutes the pre-linguistic experience of the world; it is unstructured and dangerous as not related to the conceptual structures describing the world. What is described, named, and told, is no longer a threat – even if it is only an apparent conjuration of the world. Thus understood, the Real evokes a sensation of the uncanny.

In his book *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster,⁹ when describing the category of the Real, speaks of the ‘subjugation of the eye’. Such subjugation is to consist in deceiving the power of sight, in a special selection of images and meanings. Reality is not the real, reality is a conglomerate of ideas about what is real (and, perhaps, ‘ordinary’), ideas which, in them-

7 W. Herzog, *Burden of Dreams*, 1982.

8 J.P. Sartre, *Młodości*, transl. J. Trznadel, Warszawa 1974, <http://nnk.art.pl/bujnos/blada/ocr/sartre/> [accessed 1 May 2022].

9 H. Foester, *Powrót Realnego. Awangarda u schyłku xx wieku*, transl. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, Kraków 2012.

selves, neither reflect reality as such nor lead to the real. The city appears in this juxtaposition as a reality created to pacify the real, or rather exorcise darkness and silence – phenomena that bring the horror of mystery (hearing something, seeing a shape in the dark) – out of the world. The real comes when we lose the conceptual control (illusion of control) over the world. The real is, for example, death – we can imagine it, but just coming into contact with it in our surroundings evokes a number of emotions which will not deal with easily, unless we are sociopaths.

As a villager who has known all those terrible conceptual frameworks, I want to assure you: rural reality has much less power of pacifying the real – and the real, much more visible, invades our ideas of reality more easily and more often there. The real and the uncanny roam the countryside hand in hand, crawling on the threshold of our perception, like a Lovecraft cosmic horror movie. It waits for a neurotic bourgeois who, referring to Thomas Ligotti's words from *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*,¹⁰ would like to know and believe that 'it's ok to be alive'.

Darkness and silence, mud, dung, rotting processes, and space for unpleasant thoughts. What can be done about it, what attitude should be taken towards it? I think that, instead of a strategy of denial – although these, as the authors of the terror management theory claim, are embedded in the very essence of people's thinking – we should try to befriend darkness, silence, and unpleasant thoughts, appreciate them, and maybe even begin to affirm them. As Lev Shestov notes in the *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, before becoming an apologist for the will of power, first recognised the world as a terrifying place.¹¹

We can try one more strategy – if the darkness brings lunacy upon us. It is the fight against the city, the fight against the bourgeois pursuit of calm. Maldoror, protagonist of the *Songs of Maldoror* by Comte de Lautréamont, delighted with the essence of being lice, shares his plan: 'As for me, if I may be permitted to add a few words to this hymn of glory, I shall relate that I have caused to be constructed a pit four leagues square and correspondingly deep. Therein lies in its unclean virginity, a living mine of lice. It fills the bottom of the pit and thence snakes out in great dense streams in every direction. Here is how I built this artificial mine. I snatched a female louse from the hair of humanity. I was seen to lie with her on three successive nights and then I flung her into the pit. The human fecundation, which would have been ineffective in other similar cases, was accepted this time by fate and at the end of several days thousands of monsters, swarming in a compact knot of matter, were born to the light of

10 T. Ligotti, *Spisek przeciwko ludzkiej rasie*, transl. M. Kopacz, Warszawa 2015.

11 L. Szestov, *Dostojewski i Nietzsche. Filozofia tragedii*, transl. C. Wodziński, Warszawa 2000.

day. [...] Then, with an infernal shovel that increases my strength, I dig out of that inexhaustible mine whole chunks of lice, big as mountains. I split them up with an axe and I transport them in the depths of the night to the city streets. There, in contact with human temperature, they dissolve into individuals as in the first days of their formation in the tortuous galleries of the underground mine, dig themselves a bed in the gravel and spread out in streams through human habitations like noxious spirits.’¹²

Perhaps the pressure of darkness and uncanny in the countryside does not give a choice – in order not to go mad, not to become another Maldoror, one should confront what is obscure, what cries out for denial. Never forget it, always contemplate the darkest places. Hence the title of this text, referring to the horror movie *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from 1974. In the film, a group of students makes it to a small town, which turns out to be a pit of degenerates – a motif appearing in the cinema as ‘backwood horror’.¹³ Why, then, the Żytno massacre? The village of Żytno is where I come from.

12 C. de Lautréamont, *Pieśni Maldorora i Poezje*, transl. M. Żurowski, Warszawa 1976, pp. 88-89

13 ‘Created with early movies such as *2000 Maniacs* (1964) or *Deliverance* (1972), this unofficial sub-genre plays on the myth that backwoods and remote countryside are populated with inbred freaks and maniacs’ https://horror.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Backwoods_and_redneck_films [accessed 9 October 2022].

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Abstract:

The text explores the issue of the uncanny in the context of rural and urban landscape. The question of the Uncanny is discussed in relation to the works of Jentsch, Freud, and Royle. The further part of the text refers to works from the domain of literature and cinema, by means of which the author analyses the thematic scope related to the Uncanny. It shows the countryside as a space in which it is easier to see (or more difficult to ignore) the presence of the unknown.

Keywords:

uncanny, countryside, landscape, darkness, night, anxiety

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