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Uncanny images as a diagnostic tool: the case of Artaud's late portraits

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Abstract This article examines the late portraits of Antonin Artaud through an integrated psychopathological, aesthetic, and phenomenological approach, arguing that these works serve as a matrix for identifying core features of schizophrenic experience. Produced in the artist's final years, the drawings consistently present asymmetrical, disjointed, and violently disfigured faces, which are interpreted here as markers of a specific form of dissociation, or disembodiment. More specifically, the study develops a theoretical model in which the fragmentation embedded in the formal structure of the portraits is understood as the visible expression of what Deleuze calls the "breakdown of surfaces" in schizophrenia, as well as of a disturbance affecting five fundamental dimensions of the self: vitality, activity, coherence, demarcation, and identity. After framing Artaud's portraits as the manifestation of a profound disruption of these dimensions, the paper delves into the uncanny character of the images, which emerges from their tendency to blur the boundaries between human and non-human, self and non-self, animate and inanimate. These properties are interpreted in light of the phenomenology of schizophrenia, with particular reference to disturbances of mirror self-experience and forms of self-estrangement. By treating the drawings as "diagnostic" material, the article ultimately argues that Artaud's late work offers a distinctive perspective on altered embodiment.

Keywords: Artaud, portrait, face perception, uncanny, diagnosis

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0. Introduction

Between 1945 and 1948, during his final years spent between two psychiatric institutions following a diagnosis of schizophrenia, Antonin Artaud filled hundreds of notebooks with a continuous stream of writing and drawings. In a passage from Notebook 314, later published in a pamphlet accompanying an exhibition of his graphic works (*Portraits et dessins par Antonin Artaud* at the Galerie Pierre Loeb in Paris, 1947, followed by *Antonin Artaud, dessins* at the Centre Pompidou, 1987, and *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper* at MoMA in New York, 1996-1997), Artaud wrote: «The human face is provisionally […] all that remains […] of the revolutionary demand for a body that does not conform and never has conformed to this face» (Artaud 1947; quoted in Derrida 2017: 37). Such a reflection finds an evident correspondence in the drawings—portraits and self-portraits

executed mostly in charcoal, graphite, or wax—collected in his notebooks and later exhibited in museums, which represent faces that appear to have been separated from the rest of the body they (should) belong to, as they are depicted «sometimes without a neck, sometimes with the neck as if severed from the torso» (Derrida & Thévenin 1998: 33).

Artaud's faces, thus, stand out against the void produced by fragmentation and estrangement from the wholeness of the self, pointing to an absence that can be located *beneath* the surface of the visible; yet they are also faces in which fragmentation and estrangement are inscribed directly *upon* their surface, whose detachment from a body capable of mediating the sensations that generate emotions translates into an almost complete absence of expressive vitality. A quick glance reveals, in fact, how they are, in their near totality, inhomogeneous, distorted, and misaligned with respect to the expressions one would expect to see, lost in vacant and distant gazes.

The core purpose of this article is to argue that Artaud's treatment of the face as a graphic object transcends a mere attempt to translate his poetic principles into a figurative medium, reflecting, at a much deeper level, certain definitive characteristics of the schizophrenic experience. Specifically, the stylistic and thematic properties of the portraits produced by the French playwright are shown to call forth and align with three distinct yet converging frameworks: i) the Deleuzian concept of schizophrenia as a "breakdown of surfaces"; ii) Scharfetter's phenomenological interpretation of ego fragmentation and dissociation in schizophrenia; iii) some common tropes found in first-person accounts of schizophrenia regarding the relationship with one's own and others' faces.

These diverse frameworks find a unified synthesis through the concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), acting here as both an aesthetic category and a primary perceptual phenomenon. This concept captures the reaction of rejection triggered by the encounter with an experiential content that appears suspended between antithetical domains, such as self and non-self, or the animate and the inanimate. Artaud's portraits embody this state of suspension, as their graphic distortions render the familiar structure of the face profoundly alien. After establishing the reasons for situating these drawings within the uncanny dimension, the article will demonstrate how this phenomenon manifests clinically in schizophrenia. Specifically, the analysis will focus on psychiatric literature regarding the relationship between patients and their reflected images. By examining the disturbances of mirror self-experience, the paper bridges the gap between Artaud's aesthetic "severing" and scarring of the face and the lived reality of the psychotic subject, for whom the reflection becomes an unrecognizable and estranged presence.

1. Portraits of unfelt violence

Artaud's late drawings consistently defy the conventions of portraiture. Far from celebrating the human face as a harmonious, expressive unit, these works appear to deconstruct its formal structure. In one of his rare theoretical remarks on the subject, Artaud denounces the tradition of the «oculary academicism […] of the face called pictural» (Artaud 1947; quoted in English in Derrida 2017: 38), a phrase that encapsulates his broader suspicion toward representational systems that reduce the face to an aesthetic and compositionally coherent surface. While this position carries traces of his early involvement with Surrealism—officially terminated in 1926 (cf. Hayman 1977: 60)—its persistence well into the 1940s suggests that his stance was no longer rooted in adherence to that artistic movement but in a personal, increasingly solitary rejection of mimesis as such.

Yet, the point that will be developed throughout the article is that the kind of imagery Artaud produced in the final phase of his life does not merely revolve around a desire to subvert conventional standards of likeness or stylistic arrangement, but rather emerges from a more fundamental disturbance in the perceptual and ontological coherence of the perceived face itself. The visages he renders are not simply distorted; they appear fractured along unseen axes, fissured or flayed, decomposed and decomposing, as if the very unity of the subject had been revoked. The violence inscribed on the surface of these drawings points to something more than representational defiance: it signals the crumbling of the face as a site of identity.

Consider, for instance, the 1947 portraits of Lily Dubuffet (Fig. 1)[1] and Jacques Prével (Fig. 2). In both, the basic structure of the head remains, but its internal symmetry is more or less subtly undone. The forehead appears swollen and uneven; the eyes, mismatched in size and position, refuse alignment. As Paule Thévenin—Artaud's therapist and one of the most sensitive readers of his work—notes in her commentary on the Prével portrait, the drawing exhibits a skewed geometry in which «two eyes of unequal size» sit beneath «a bumpy, deformed forehead» (Derrida & Thévenin 1998: 35). What is striking here is the irregularity of the face, as if the act of drawing had exposed a latent fissure running through its structure, and the two halves belong to different faces, barely held together by the outline that contains them.

Still, these examples represent only a moderate stage in Artaud's treatment of the visage. In *Autoportrait* (1946, Fig. 3), *La Tête bleue* (1946, Fig. 4), and *Paule aux ferrets* (1947, Fig. 5), the faces are not just deformed—they are slashed, pocked, or visibly assaulted, bearing signs that evoke infection, internal decay, or ritualized violence. In both *Autoportrait* and *La Tête bleue*, the damage appears to erupt from within, as if a corrosive force were pushing outward from beneath the skin. Kendall (2011) compares the scattered marks to «cigarette burns, or […] plague buboes» (p. 7), highlighting the pathological resonance of Artaud's graphic interventions.

In *Paule aux ferrets*, by contrast, the aggression is unmistakably exogenous: saws, blades, and other torture devices are visibly embedded in—or about to pierce—the face and neck, leaving no doubt as to the direction and intentionality of the attack. Nonetheless, despite the stark brutality, the expression remains blank, suspended in a state of mute resignation and offering «a sense of melancholic quietude» (Ho 1997: 20)—much like the passive gaze of *Autoportrait*. *La Tête bleue*, on the other hand, breaks this impassivity: the features appear to melt or buckle, as if warped by an internal pressure or heat, and suffering emerges as the dominant expressive force[2]. What differentiates these images is not how much violence is inflicted, but whether the face allows it to become legible.

The different "reactions" of the faces portrayed in the three works just analyzed reveal a key aspect of Artaud's poetics: namely, that suffering is never the end point of his works, but rather the instrument through which he tries to animate the faces in his drawings. As Artaud writes, «Van Gogh only could make of the human head a portrait which was the bursting flare of a throbbing, exploded heart» (Artaud 1947/1996: 95). The true failure of portraiture, for Artaud, lies in its inability to make faces speak, to

[1] All the artworks mentioned and discussed in this article are available for consultation at the following link: https://gpennisi22.github.io/Artaud-s-portraits/figure_gallery_all_9.html
Each image is referenced throughout the text by a corresponding figure number (Fig. 1, Fig. 2, etc.).

[2] *La Tête bleue* remains the only drawing among those examined here whose subject has not been definitively identified. Some interpret it as a highly abstract female figure (cf. Kendall 2011: 14), others as a self-portrait (cf. Kuspit 1997: 80). This ambiguity may help account for the singularity of its expression: unlike the other faces, which remain impassive or vacated, this one reflects pain. One might speculate that this visible suffering corresponds to a crisis of identity—perhaps Artaud's own—staged through an ambiguous, androgynous figure that destabilizes the boundary between self and other.

charge them with the intensity needed to break the placid surface of representation and expose the raw, existential truth that «the living […] must go through death in order to live» (Derrida & Thévenin 1998: 37). In this light, the cuts and burns in Artaud's drawings are not expressive flourishes but interrogations. The face becomes a surface to be questioned, pushed, and violated, forced to yield whatever truths it may be hiding. His wounded visages are vehicles of inquiry, "signifiers" driven by a need for «designation or address that cannot happen without a blow being transferred into them [*sans coup férir*] » (cf. Derrida 2017: 53).

This need ties back to another cornerstone of both Artaud's poetics and visual aesthetics: his conception of the face as something "foreign" to the body. This idea appears both in the excerpt quoted in the Introduction and in *Le visage humain*, a 1947 text in which Artaud claims that «the human face is an empty force, a field of death […], a form that has never corresponded to its body, that started off as something other than the body» (Artaud 1947/1996: 94). Notably, this is not a late trope in Artaud's artistic and literary production. As Sass (2003) notes, it had already surfaced in a 1932 letter (Artaud 1932/1965), in which Artaud described his own face as «a kind of fluid mask, a fragile lived membrane of squirming sensitivity and kaleidoscopic pattern that lifts up from his head to float independently in the air» (Sass 2003: 170). Years later, this abstract and evocative image would be transplanted onto paper in the form of self-portraits, such as those drawn between 1946 (Fig. 3) and 1947 (Fig. 6), where the playwright's face appears emaciated, covered in sores, and suspended in a disembodied void reflected in its vacant expression.

The physical and ontological distance separating the face from the body is thus thematized by Artaud in various writings, but it emerges unequivocally in his portraits, especially through two recurring features found in (almost) all of them.

The first is the impassivity that—*La Tête bleue* being the exception—radiates from the faces of the depicted individuals, regardless of how intensely they are hurt. Beyond the works already discussed, consider the portrait of Alain Gheerbrant, made in 1947 and featured on the cover of the 1995 edition of his *La transversale: mémoires* (Fig. 7), as well as a 1948 untitled drawing composed of multiple faces (Fig. 8). In both cases, the countless marks left by Artaud on his subjects' skin provoke only indifferent, cold, and imperturbable gazes, as if their heads were detached from the nerve endings that carry pain impulses to the brain. In a certain sense, this represents a concession from Artaud, who, no matter how hard he tries to breathe life into his creations by flogging them with pencil strokes, must capitulate to the fact that «for thousands and thousands of years […] the human face has talked and breathed and one is under the impression still that it has not begun to say what it is and what it knows» (Artaud 1947/1996: 95). In another sense—discussed elsewhere (Pennisi 2019) and revisited later—this can be interpreted as a mere transcription onto paper of one of the typical symptoms of schizophrenia: the inability to recognize the emotions conveyed by the human face (see §3).

The second characteristic that points to the split between body and face in Artaud is the absolute absence in his portraits of any anatomical elements beyond the skull and neck. Examining all the drawings discussed so far, one notes that in each of them there is not even the sketch of a chest or shoulders to support the neck to which the subject's head is attached. To borrow again Thévenin's words, Artaud's faces are «decapitated faces [that] interrogate you with all the force of their absent bodies» (Derrida & Thévenin 1998: 36). Derrida echoes her by highlighting how Artaud's act of "guillotining" the heads signals a failure to endow the face with both individuality and intentionality: «striking a blow at the head […], [Artaud] decapitates the whole of the whole, which is to say, the *who* and the *what*» (Derrida 2017: 4) of the face. Figuratively speaking, Artaud's faces resemble those uncooperative prisoners who, even when subjected to the

most sadistic tortures, stubbornly refuse to reveal who they are and what they really want.

In light of Derrida's words, it seems possible to suggest that the emotional dimension of Artaud's portraits—the *what* of the face, meaning what it seeks or is meant to convey—is intimately tied to its identity dimension—the *who* of the face—and that, when the head is severed from the body, both dimensions collapse simultaneously. The way in which this relationship unfolds will be examined later; first, however, it is important to clarify why the faces depicted by Artaud may be considered paradigmatic instances of *disembodied* faces.

2. From the aesthetics to the experience of disembodiment

Artaud's portraits present faces that are disembodied in more than one sense. On the one hand, they are stripped of flesh—literally skinned. In several drawings, large segments of the subject's face and neck appear to have been removed, revealing what lies beneath: muscle, bone, and raw organic texture. This impression of anatomical exposure—suggesting decomposition, erosion, or even surgical excision—is especially marked in *Autoportrait* (Fig. 3) and *Paule aux ferrets* (Fig. 5). In both, it becomes nearly impossible to determine whether the eyes that confront the viewer belong to a body still alive or to a corpse animated by some residual flicker of vitality in its gaze. These faces, wounded yet staring back, hover in a perceptual limbo between the living and the dead. Their effect is not simply grotesque or morbid, but uncanny, precisely because they resist classification (see Surace 2021). This ambiguity, which constitutes the core tension animating these images, will be unpacked in the next section.

On the other hand, as Derrida and Thévenin have argued, Artaud's faces are disembodied in a more structural sense: they are decapitated, severed from the rest of the body, suspended in isolation. They float in blank or abstracted space, devoid of torsos, shoulders, or any anatomical support. While this severance may reflect Artaud's own assertion that the face is "a form born to be other than the body", the condition it evokes is not one of absolute rupture but of shared collapse. The alienation of the face from the body does not simply mark a division; it signals a fate that engulfs both.

To better understand the implications of this dynamic, it is helpful to turn to a key passage from Deleuze:

> Body-sieve, fragmented body, and dissociated body form the first three dimensions of the schizophrenic body—they give evidence of the general breakdown of surfaces. In this breakdown of the surface, all words lose their meaning. They may retain a certain power of designation, but one which is experienced as empty; a certain power of manifestation, but experienced as indifferent; a certain signification, but experienced as "false" (Deleuze 1979: 287).

Deleuze's notion of the "body-sieve" captures the porous and destabilized condition of the schizophrenic body, which no longer functions as a protective boundary but as a permeable filter, unable to shield the subject from external stimuli. In this state, the distinction between self and other becomes blurred or collapses entirely (see Gipps 2020; Jimenez & Green 2024), and the body may be experienced as alien, inorganic, or mechanized, resembling a machine more than a living organism (cf. de Haan & Fuchs 2010: 330). This condition, in which «everything is a mixture of bodies and, within the body, telescoping, nesting in and penetrating each other» (Deleuze 1979: 286), finds a striking analogue in Artaud's visual treatment of the face. His drawings often portray the face as a permeable «membrane of multiple degrees and a million little fissures […]

capable of multiplying, splitting apart, turning inside out » (Artaud 1932/1965: 39). The collapse of oppositions—between inside and outside, human and non-human, self and other—becomes a defining feature of both the schizophrenic's experience of the body and Artaud's disfigured visages.

The subsequent notions of the "fragmented body" and the "dissociated body", by contrast, become clearer when examined in relation to one another. As the Austrian psychiatrist Scharfetter argues, the «fragmentation or splitting of the ego [is considered] to be a special form of dissociation, striking the ego/self along the five basic dimensions of *vitality*, *activity*, *coherence/consistency*, *demarcation*, and *identity*» (Scharfetter 2019: 69). Each of these dimensions corresponds to distinct symptoms, allowing schizophrenic manifestations of self-fragmentation to be categorized accordingly. A few illustrative examples include:

1. Disorders of ego vitality: e.g., the feeling of no longer being alive or the sensation of decaying (cf. Scharfetter 2003: 274; 2019: 71);
2. Disorders of ego activity: e.g., a state of paralysis so deep that the subject sometimes cannot perceive their own limbs (cf. Scharfetter 2003: 275; 2019: 71);
3. Disorders of ego coherence/consistency: e.g., the experience of being split into multiple parts, cut into pieces, or dissolved (cf. Scharfetter 2003: 275; 2019: 72);
4. Disorders of ego demarcation: e.g., a sense of vulnerability or exposure to external forces (cf. Scharfetter 2003: 276; 2019: 72);
5. Disorders of ego identity: e.g., a general loss of self, often accompanied by delusions of being an animal, a monster, or simultaneously belonging to both sexes (cf. Scharfetter 2003: 276; 2019: 73).

It is striking how closely the symptoms described by Scharfetter across the five dimensions of ego disturbance find their visual counterparts in Artaud's portraits. These drawings seem to render, with disquieting precision, the fragmented experience of the self characteristic of schizophrenia:

1. Disorders of ego vitality: figures appear suspended between life and death, their features marked by decay and decomposition (Figs. 3, 4, 5, 8);
2. Disorders of ego activity: their gazes are frozen and affectless (Figs. 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9), while the body below the neck is entirely absent (all figures), as if cut off from the realm of sensory experience;
3. Disorders of ego coherence/consistency: faces are asymmetrical (Figs. 1, 2, 7, 8), sutured together (Figs. 2, 3, 7, 8), scratched and segmented (Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8), or eaten away to the bone (Figs. 3, 4, 8);
4. Disorders of ego demarcation: they appear powerless before the violence done to them (Figs. 5, 9);
5. Disorders of ego identity: their identities are destabilized by features that suggest monstrosity (Figs. 3, 8) or androgyny (Fig. 4).

A continuity thus emerges between the phenomenology of schizophrenic disembodiment and the aesthetic logic underlying Artaud's graphic representation of the face. While this may seem to contradict his claim in *Le visage humain*—that the face is "a form born to be other than the body"—it can instead be understood as the obverse of that very assertion. Artaud's mute, suspended heads may function as autonomous entities, but their very detachment can be seen as a symptom of a bodily experience

marked, *in its entirety*, «by an essential disharmony, a proneness to fragmentation and conflict, both with the world and within the self» (Sass 1992: 109).
The vertical severing between upper and lower parts of the body performed by Artaud, as well as his violent, haptic incisions that engender confusion between what lies beneath and upon the face, can therefore be read as visual manifestations of a deeper ontological crisis. This process aligns with what Deleuze (1979) describes, in the aforementioned passage, as the "breakdown of surfaces" in schizophrenia—a concept that will be further developed in the next section. Unsurprisingly, the loss of the designative, manifestative, and significative powers that Deleuze associates with schizophrenic language reemerges in Artaud's portraits as a breakdown of the corresponding facial operativity. Much like the words such faces might be imagined to produce, these visages appear empty, indifferent, and deceptive, as if they had lost not only the capacity to convey authentic emotion but even the ability to register the difference between pain and numbness, anguish and apathy.
At this stage, it becomes important to ask how far the insights gained from analyzing the correspondence between the aesthetic and the phenomenological dimensions of disembodiment can be extended. Specifically: to what extent does Artaud's visual treatment of the human face reflect a symptom structure consistent with how schizophrenic patients experience and perceive faciality? Answering this question requires a return to the notion of the uncanny.

3. Phenomenology of the liminal face

The term *uncanny* is a substantivized adjective used to translate the title of Freud's influential 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* (Freud 1919/1925). In that text, Freud explores the psychological and semantic complexity of the concept, starting from the earlier analysis proposed by German psychiatrist Jentsch in his 1906 article *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen*. For Jentsch, the uncanny (*unheimlich*) refers to those phenomena that produce disorientation in the observer by straddling the line between the familiar and the alien, the human and the non-human. Prime examples, he suggests, include wax figures, mechanical dolls, and life-sized automata «capable of carrying out complex tasks such as dancing or playing the trumpet» (Jentsch 1906: 203, my translation), which appear almost alive, yet lack true vitality.
Freud, however, adds an etymological layer to Jentsch's account. He notes that *heimlich*—from which *unheimlich* derives—carries a surprisingly ambivalent semantic charge. While the root *heim* (home) and the suffix *-lich* might suggest something homely or familiar, Freud points out that *heimlich* also denotes something "secret", "hidden", or "kept from view". Consequently, its opposite—*unheimlich*—refers not simply to what is unfamiliar, but to something «that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light» (Freud 1919/1925: 225). The uncanny, then, can be defined as the dissonance produced by contact with an interstitial and contradictory experiential content, which at the same time is perceived as something whose ambiguity should not have revealed itself to the eyes of the observer (cf. Pennisi 2023a: 169).
In light of this lexical framing, it becomes clear why Artaud's portraits are uncanny works. They constantly question the self-evident and familiar truth (the *who* and the *what*) of the face, pushing it into a state of perpetual tension with everything a face, conceived as façade or surface, is supposed to conceal: tissues and bones in the literal sense, and the inevitability of decay and death in a broader sense. This "breakdown of surfaces" was already diagnosed by Deleuze (1979), for whom the sieve-body, the fragmented body, and the dissociated body are manifestations of the schizophrenic subject's inability to maintain the boundaries between a series of dichotomies that

structure lived experience, such as those between «interior and exterior, container and content» (p. 287). To these we might add further oppositions (living/dead, animate/inanimate, self/other, human/non-human) the collapse of which exemplifies what could be described as a *surface demarcation deficit* in schizophrenia—one that, crucially, extends even to the experience of one's own face in the mirror.

The theme of disorientation before one's reflected self has been widely explored in the literature on mirror experience. One of the most influential accounts is offered by Lacan in his 1949 essay on the "mirror stage", where he describes the formation of bodily identity as a gradual and painstaking process beginning around six months of age—an identification that, while necessary for the construction of self-representation, often carries with it a sense of unsettling estrangement. The mirror reflects a version of the self that feels both familiar and foreign, producing moments in which one may struggle to fully recognize oneself or feel disconnected from one's own reflection. This distance between inner experience and outer appearance is precisely what Lacan encapsulates in his notion of the «armor of an alienating identity» (Lacan 1949/2006: 97): a façade that confers coherence and stability, yet imposes an external form onto a subject who may not feel aligned with it.

This idea of alienation has been further developed by Rochat and Zahavi (2011), who argue that mirror-gazing gives rise to a dual estrangement: first, from oneself, insofar as the subject comes to know their own body through a reflected double that is «distant and yet close, […] felt as another, and yet as myself» (p. 209); and second, from others, as the subject gradually becomes aware that the image seen in the mirror—the external shell—is also what others see, and thus defines how one is perceived. The inherently dichotomous nature of mirror experience—marked by the ongoing contrast between self and non-self, internal and external image—is what makes recognition in the mirror an "unsettling [experience] at both a perceptual (optic) and affective level […], an uncanny sort of out of body experience" (Rochat & Zahavi 2011: 212).

Crucially, the uncanny dimension of mirror-gazing is particularly intense in schizophrenia, and is related to what was previously called the surface demarcation deficit. To clarify this point, consider the following passages, taken from first-hand accounts given to their psychiatrists by a genetically at-risk 11-year-old (Case 1) and two adult schizophrenic patients (Case 2, Case 3):

> Case 1:
> «When I look at the mirror, for example washing my face or my teeth, after a while I feel I do not exist, as if the mirror makes me forget who I am… my image at the mirror is always the same, it doesn't change… then I try to close my eyes but when I open them I have the same feeling» (Poletti & Raballo 2019: 319).

> Case 2:
> «When I am looking into a mirror, I do not know anymore whether I am here looking at me there in the mirror, or whether I am there in the mirror looking at me here […]. Are there perhaps two 'I's?" (Kimura 1994: 194, my translation).

> Case 3:
> «Since I was little, I have had a fear of mirrors. Sometimes the face in the mirror does something unexpected or looks like a drawing. At other times, when I walk past the mirror my specular image remains in the mirror. I can have the feeling that my mirror-image remains in the mirror after I have left the bathroom. It is very disturbing since it is as if I left it behind and it becomes angry with me as a result» (Sandsten, Zahavi & Parnas 2022: 276).

Taken together, these testimonies show that one of the features common to mirror experience in both the pre-psychotic and psychotic phases of schizophrenia is the confusion triggered by the doubling produced by the reflection. This confusion may manifest as the sensation of facing a still, lifeless face (Case 1), or as the inability to discern which side of the mirror contains the "real" self (Case 2, Case 3).

In Case 1, the source of the uncanny lies in perceiving the mirrored face as a static entity, incapable of reflecting the vitality and expressive movement it should represent. Instead of appearing dynamic and responsive, the reflection remains frozen, and this immobility is projected back onto the subject, even calling into question their own existence. The result is an «uncanny effect [that derives] from the imminent dissolution of the borders that we draw up between the animate and inanimate world since early childhood» (Fuchs 2019: 108).

In its most extreme expression, this ambiguity between being alive or dead can take the form of Cotard's syndrome, a rare neuropsychiatric disorder occasionally associated with schizophrenia (see Bott et al. 2016), in which the patients believe they are dead, non-existent, or missing bodily parts. Even when it does not reach this level, the failure to perceive the reflected face as alive is often tied to other serious schizophrenic symptoms, such as the inability to recognize emotions in the mirror (Demily et al. 2011) or to identify with one's mirrored image (Bortolon et al. 2017).

These two manifestations—though relatively underexplored in psychopathological literature (cf. Demily et al. 2011: 189; Bortolon et al. 2017: 205)—offer valuable insight into the relationship between what Derrida (2017: 4) defines as the *who* and the *what* of the face. In Case 1, the collapse of perceptual dynamism in mirror experience—which, according to Poletti and Raballo (2019), may stem from dysfunction in the brain's corollary discharge mechanisms (see also Pennisi 2023b; 2025a; 2025b; 2025c)—appears to cause a simultaneous loss of both expressiveness and recognizability in the reflected face. Over time, the repeated perception of a face that refuses to mirror the subject's vitality, expressions, or emotions may lead to a full breakdown in identification, to the point where the image «takes on a life of its own, producing expressions that are almost invariably threatening, rarely or never benevolent» (Harrington, Oepen & Spitzer 1989: 378).

This last aspect is particularly evident in Case 2 and Case 3, where the uncanny lies in the presence of a doppelgänger—a "virtual" version of the subject that faithfully reproduces the real self's appearance but behaves autonomously. The doppelgänger is a recurring figure in literature, art, and film (for an overview, see Duerre Humann 2018), often capable of instilling in those who encounter it the suspicion that it might be the original, or of plunging the actual self into a full-blown identity crisis. However, it is unusual for fear regarding the existence of an alter ego to be triggered by one's own reflection—or at least,

> the sense of alienation remains extremely transient [in non-pathological cases]. In schizophrenia this experience of "looking at oneself in the mirror" is alienating in a much more radical manner. When we look in the mirror, the two moments of "looking at" and "being looked at" might present themselves as two distinct moments, but crucially they remain parts of one and the same experience. In schizophrenia, however, these two moments come to the fore as separate and the very link between them has become insecure (Stephensen & Parnas 2018: 635).

Thus, one of the ways in which the uncanny infiltrates mirror self-perception in schizophrenia is through the dissonance produced by the reflection appearing both familiar and alien—similar or identical to the subject, yet independent and self-

sufficient. This strange impression of "familiar unfamiliarity" reaches its peak when the mirror image reveals aspects of the subject that were previously repressed, or that had emerged only through other symptoms (e.g., in the form of auditory hallucinations). In such cases, the mirrored double often behaves in ways that align with the dominant structure of the patient's delusion. This mechanism is vividly illustrated in the following passage from Laing's *The Divided Self*:

> The manifest onset of one man's illness occurred when he looked into a mirror and saw someone also there (in fact, his own reflection): 'him'. 'He' was to be his persecutor in a paranoid psychosis. 'He' (i.e. 'him') was the instigator of a plot to kill him (i.e. the patient) and he (the patient) was determined to 'put a bullet through "him"' (his alienated self) (Laing 1960: 126).

The correlation between the specific nature of delusional content—e.g., persecutory delusions—and the physiognomic or behavioral characteristics of the mirrored face becomes apparent when not only the boundary between self and non-self is blurred, but also that between the human and the non-human. This is demonstrated in a study by Caputo and colleagues (2012), which investigated the occurrence of anomalous mirror apparitions in two groups: 24 non-clinical participants and 25 individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia. The task required subjects to gaze at their own reflection in a dimly lit room for an extended period—an experimental setup known to induce the so-called "strange-face illusion" (Caputo 2010a; Mash et al. 2023).

The findings revealed that schizophrenic participants reported seeing monstrous facial apparitions significantly more often than their non-schizophrenic counterparts (88% vs. 29%), with many of these apparitions described as demonic figures. In a later interpretation of the results, Caputo and colleagues suggested that «these sorts of hallucinations possibly relate to "mystical delirium", in which patients perceive apparitions of angelic—and more often demonic—entities that are reflected behind them in the mirror» (Caputo, Lynn & Houran 2021: 443-444).

Beyond the specific content of these hallucinations, the participants' differing reactions to them are equally noteworthy. The researchers observed that the progressive transformation of one's face into a monstrous figure led to a disidentification with the image in nearly all non-clinical participants (87%), but in only slightly more than half (52%) of the schizophrenic group. These results align with those of a previous experiment (Caputo 2010b), in which non-schizophrenic participants also showed a clear tendency to dissociate from their altered, monstrous reflection. This pattern suggests that «schizophrenics can identify themselves with strange-face apparitions, differently from healthy individuals who always feel dissociative experiences during strange-face apparitions and never identify with them» (Caputo et al. 2012: 49).

It would seem, then, that when environmental (e.g., low light) and physical (e.g., static observation) conditions disrupt the normal experience of mirror reflection, schizophrenic individuals tend to give more "rational" responses than healthy subjects[3] (see Pennisi 2023a; 2023b). Moreover, the tendency of schizophrenic participants to identify with their distorted reflection—whereas non-clinical individuals tend to reject it—suggests that the former may have a higher threshold for tolerating the uncanny, at least under conditions favorable to altered perception. These two findings raise

[3] The apparent rationality of the patients' responses lies in the fact that, unlike non-clinical participants who insist that the face in the mirror is not their own, schizophrenic individuals seem to accept the apparition as their reflection. From a strictly rational standpoint, non-clinical participants know that the figure must be their own—since they are alone in the room and the illusion is induced by the experimental setting—yet they experience a dissociation that leads them to deny this.

important questions regarding the uncanny and its potential clinical applications. However, the broader therapeutic implications of this phenomenon transcend the scope of the present article. Such matters are more extensively examined in further research, where these themes have been pursued in greater depth (see Pennisi 2025d).

4. Conclusion

Phenomenological and experimental research on anomalous mirror experiences in schizophrenia suggests that the reflective device may be capable of revealing or bringing to light specific traits of the pathology, such as the inability to demarcate a clear boundary between self and non-self or the specific nature of the subject's delusions, ranging from persecutory to mystical ideations. This function of the mirror and the experimental paradigms used to investigate it, most notably the "strange-face illusion", led Caputo to define the latter as «an ecological setting […] for imaging of the unconscious» (Caputo 2014: 9). In other words, Caputo posits that the artificial induction of optical illusions and the resulting «apparitions in a mirror of archetypical people (old woman, child, etc.), of ancestors, and of animal faces (cat, pig, lion, etc.) could be manifestations of an individual's Self [in the Jungian sense]» (Caputo 2010b: 1136-1137).

While the feasibility of constructing a systematic "taxonomy of apparitional experiences" remains open to debate (cf. Pennisi 2025c: 306), such research represents a significant attempt to trace the structural foundations of the self through the phenomenological description of images. This article has pursued an analogous operation by applying the concept of the uncanny to Artaud's portraits, treating these static graphic objects as the functional equivalents of the dynamic reflections encountered in the mirror. In both instances, the uncanny emerges forcefully because the images exist at the threshold between antithetical categories—the animate and the inanimate, the self and the other—acting as a key to deciphering schizophrenic symptoms through visual analysis. By examining the aesthetic properties of Artaud's drawings, including their violent incisions and formal asymmetries, the study brings to light the disturbances affecting the fundamental dimensions of the ego as identified by Scharfetter (2003; 2019), which find in the graphic mark their most direct and tangible expression. Ultimately, Artaud's work and mirror experience in schizophrenia converge in a single theoretical horizon: both provide a surface where the collapse of the face becomes the manifest proof of an identity that has lost its coherence and can only encounter itself as a haunting alterity.

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