

## The Uncanny in *Avatar: the Last Airbender*

*Avatar: the Last Airbender* is an animated series focusing on the child avatar Aang's journey to restore the balance of the fictional world where the story takes place. It is told over the course of three seasons and features a variety of complex characters and story points in a world with a pseudo-magical martial art system called "bending". The avatar is the only person capable of bending all four elements (earth, fire, water, and air) and is tasked to end a one-hundred-year war spearheaded by Fire Nation aggressors. There are a variety of spiritual elements throughout the story, including an entire "spirit world" which includes non-human characters who operate outside of the realm of the stories main plane.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the episode "The Siege of the North, Part 2", one of these characters, Koh, provides an example of an unusual use of the uncanny in traditional 2D animation. It manages to be appropriately scary for its target audience and effectively uses elements of the uncanny without relying on the eeriness of stop-motion or photorealism to play upon making the familiar strange<sup>2</sup> using color, insectoids, and the concept of "face-stealing".

Koh is introduced in the final episode of the first season of *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. Though a great deal of world-building and plot development lead up to this episode, the most important context in relation to Koh is that he is an ancient spirit who has vital information needed help the protagonists drive back the Fire Nation invading force from the Northern Water Tribe. It is established that Koh is not a benevolent spirit, however, and that he is known

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<sup>1</sup>"The Siege of the North, Part 2." *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, December 2, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", trans. Alix Strachey, (PDF File, 1919. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>), 1.

as the “Face-Stealer”. He steals the faces of others and uses them in the place of an eye-like feature on his unsettling insectoid body if he manages to see the original owner emote.<sup>3</sup> Generally, people find insects to be frightening. Whether this is a primal, instinctive fear instilled to protect us from potentially venomous insects or, the fact that insects lack the familiarity of other living creatures due to their lack of recognizable, visible faces remains to be seen. If it is in fact the latter, then Freud postulates that this falls into the realm of the uncanny as a seemingly inanimate being is capable of movement.<sup>4</sup>

Every scene in the “spirit world” of the story takes place with a sepia overlay.<sup>5</sup> While the entirety of the spirit world has just a slight feeling of unease or disjointedness due to its fae-like residents and half-step away from reality, it is this change in color that really separates it from the real world. As Kandinsky notes, the “eye is strongly attracted by light, clear colours, and still more strongly attracted by those colours which are warm as well as clear.”<sup>6</sup> The rest of the series depends on this palate. It makes the world of the story interesting and inviting and draws the audience to the universe with a welcoming, familiar tone.<sup>7</sup> The spirit world deviates from this palate to differentiate it from the safety and familiarity of reality. Koh resides in this otherworldly plane. Strangely, there is a flashback in this episode that takes on a similar color palate to the spirit world scheme where an antagonist is doing research on one of the spirits in the story’s mythos.<sup>8</sup> Whether this is done intentionally to connect the themes of spirits or

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<sup>3</sup> Fig. 1. “The Siege of the North, Part 2.” *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, December 2, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Fig. 2. “The Siege of the North, Part 2.”

<sup>6</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2008), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Fig. 3. “The Siege of the North, Part 2.”

<sup>8</sup> Fig. 4. “The Siege of the North, Part 2.”

simply a similar palate to show the past is unclear. What is clear is that part of Koh's uncanniness rests in the fact that he resides in a plane that is familiar, yet just slightly different from the established in-story universe.

However, what is truly most unsettling about Koh is how literally steals others' faces to use as his own. These faces are revealed in an eye-like feature on his insect body and do all the spirit's emoting. Freud notes that "no bodily injury is so much dreaded...as an injury to the eye."<sup>9</sup> *Avatar* takes this a step further and steals the whole face, thus not only blinding the victim, but entirely taking away their ability to show emotion. Now, the individual is left to roam with only a body, but no face to use for interaction. Their face is used like a mask by Koh, something once so inherently representative of the self is stolen by an otherworldly being and manipulated in ways outside of the original's motivations.<sup>10</sup> What happens to the victim beyond this is left unexplained, likely because *Avatar* is a children's show and the plot relies on Koh as a source of information and does not dwell on demonic entity that leaves his unwary victims to starve to death or perish via some other related means.<sup>11</sup>

Another feature that pushes Koh into the realm of the uncanny is the way which he uses these stolen faces as kinds of puppets to convey his thoughts and words through the unwilling faces of past victims. Instead of being manipulated by their intended owners, Koh acts as sort of puppeteer to manipulate the faces to suit his needs. This means that Koh acts as a two-dimensional representation of the hands that move characters in stop motion animation. He

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<sup>9</sup>Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", 7.

<sup>10</sup> Fig. 5. "The Siege of the North, Part 2."

<sup>11</sup> Fig. 6. "The Siege of the North, Part 2."

takes on the role of an animator, but given the restrictions of his form he is forced to “‘act’ through the puppet.”<sup>12</sup> What truly moves this into the uncanny is the knowledge that the puppets in this case are unwilling victims. This unsettling “portmanteau”<sup>13</sup> of interchangeable faces are familiar and emote appropriately, but the audience remains intensely aware that these faces are not being acted upon by their original owner for their original purpose but instead by an outside, otherworldly puppeteer- thus moving them from the familiar to the uncanny. This also invokes the uncanny element of Freud’s “double”. These faces were deliberately taken from their original owner and manipulated until they became something familiar yet entirely separated from their original purpose. Essentially the original “self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own.”<sup>14</sup>

While it is unusual to see the uncanny outside of stop-motion and realistic representations of living creatures, *Avatar: the Last Airbender* cleverly manages to do this by applying a number uncanny tropes to its two dimensional animation style. It moves the audience into a familiar, but slightly different world and engages the use of a malevolent spirit who acts as a puppeteer of the plethora of faces he’s stolen over the course of millennia. The fear of having one’s identity stolen and replicated outside of an individual’s will feeds into the fear of a “double” and inherent loss of empathy found within the self.

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<sup>12</sup> Buchan, Suzanne. *The Quay Brothers: into a Metaphysical Playroom*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 106.

<sup>13</sup> Buchan, *The Quay Brothers: into a Metaphysical Playroom*, 124

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, 9.

Images from "The Siege of the North, Part 2."

Fig. 1: "The Siege of the North, Part 2." *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, December 2, 2005.



Fig. 2: "The Siege of the North, Part 2."



Fig. 3: "The Siege of the North, Part 2"



Fig 4: "The Siege of the North, Part 2."



Fig. 5: "The Siege of the North, Part 2."



Fig. 6: "The Siege of the North, Part 2."



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