

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire

The Cursed Image: Why do we want to keep looking?

By

Li Cowbee Kalksztejn

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Declaration of originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed

Li Candee Kalksztejn

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Introduction

This thesis is an inquiry into the current online phenomenon known as the “cursed image.” It will explore the cursed image and its recognizability in art, in particular abject and /or surreal art forms. Internet culture has been in constant development for over 30 years, and since the invention of the internet in 1989 humans have gone above and beyond to make the world wide web somewhat of a home- somewhere where we can be comfortable, share things with friends and see to our particular interests. In 2022 it can be so simple to click a link and be transported to a world of botany, politics, recipe books or even sports. While the subjects named above are all interesting in their own way, I want to focus on the cursed image as I find it to be the most fascinating online phenomenon. I feel it is important to investigate this subject as it is much more than a single meme¹ being reposted or shared with friends, I feel it can tell us something about ourselves as humans even if we don’t see it instantly. I will explore this subject through several different approaches, starting with my own personal understanding of the cursed image and finishing with looking at it through psychological theories.

¹ “meme” was a term coined by Richard Dawkins in his book “The Selfish Gene”- a unit of information carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices passed through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. In the modern day a meme is a digital photograph, video or perhaps even an audio bite which is spread across the internet via popular demand. Memes going “viral” means they have spread around the web at a remarkable speed.

This thesis draws upon empirical data from my own small sample qualitative research, monitoring and searching for the cursed image via internet websites as well as through conducting informal interviews. Through these means I have gathered enough information in order to explore this vast and interesting subject and fabricate a small empirical study of the cursed image.

Chapter one explores the history of the cursed image online, where and when it began, where it is now and how it makes its way around social circles. I investigate how the original @cursedimages Tumblr account inspired so many people to follow suit and create their own archives of “cursed” content. I examine why these people decided to spend time on curating and upholding these collections as well as why people seem to enjoy them. Exploring this fascination/disgust relationship we have with cursed images and abject art will be the area of concern for this discussion.

This chapter also discusses samples taken from informal interviews I have conducted, as an initial exploration of the relationships and reactions people have to this content is information best sought after by going straight to the source in a one-on-one interview. Hearing these peoples’ thoughts on the cursed image was quite interesting and I couldn’t stop wanting to hear more, we all view the world so differently, so why do some of us want to keep looking at cursed images? This motivated me to undertake further research and investigate the meaning, as well as features, of the cursed image.

Chapter two investigates shock art and how the basis of the cursed image was alive and well far before the presence of the internet. This section also discusses my search for the similarities between the modern cursed image and the chosen examples of

shock art. Why is shock art shocking, and what similarities are there between the chosen artists?

Chapter three tackles a more psychological approach, investigating the links between these images and concepts such as fight-or-flight responses, Freud's theory of the uncanny, the car crash theory, and doing so through a thorough analysis of chosen cursed images. This chapter seeks to understand the emotional relationship we have to cursed images, or uncanny and surreal art.

This thesis was born from my personal fascination towards the cursed image phenomenon. I have always found them intriguing as a concept and this infatuation spawned many questions I wanted to explore: Why is the subject matter never the same? Who makes these and why? How do they spread so quickly from person to person? How are they so popular without a single creator?

I wanted to find answers, which is why I began my research by following the phenomenon online more seriously, focusing on how cursed images appear on my timeline, taking note of who posts the images and who do they credit if they're a curating account, who shares them further, etc. When I felt I had a good personal understanding of the concept I progressed my investigation, moving on to find sources who have explained what the current idea of a cursed image is online, I found many articles trying to break down what a cursed image is in the simplest of ways. It gave me an idea of how I would explain this concept to someone who wasn't already in some way familiar with it. This then led me to conduct small-scale empirical research through informal interviews. Seeing how another person views the cursed image made

me realize that even though we are all looking at the same thing we are seeing something so different. Below is an excerpt of the interview:

Q: You say disgust, or terror, can you tell me why you want to keep looking at them if those are your feelings?

A: “I suppose it's very rare to have an emotional response to an image when we see so many on a regular basis on a platform such as Instagram. I think a lot of the time people our age can feel –what’s the fucking word- desensitized and disconnected. and I think looking at cursed images brings a lightheartedness and um a comedic value to photography.

I think humans are drawn to things that upset us, we have a great sense of curiosity which I think is why the likes of true crime documentaries and murder mysteries are so popular in mainstream media.”

“Desensitized and disconnected” caught my interest and lit a flame of curiosity, I wanted to know more. Are people my age desensitized due to social media? Is it hard to visually shock or confuse someone who is a child of the internet? And if so, why? And thus, began my journey on finding out why do we want to keep looking?

Chapter 1: The Cursed Image

Introduction

The cursed image is an online phenomenon which started on Tumblr in 2015. Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989 and allowed us to experience being connected to everything and everybody, everywhere.² Since then, humans have invented things such as electronic mail (e-mail), social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), online dating applications (tinder, grindr, etc.) and even online games (Call of Duty, Little Big Planet, etc.) Thanks to Berners-Lee and other pioneers of the internet age we have been able to achieve an unprecedented level of connection with our community and others around the world, linked up not only with one another from our real-world social circles but also with anyone who possesses similar interests through an action as simple as a click on a link or comment under a photo, which makes it so easy for memes to get around in groups that connect on a shared humour or emotion. The cursed image is a phenomenon which was born thanks to this invention and how humans use it. Communities with particular interests can curate their own collections of content and share it with friends as they please, and they do so at incredible speed.

² Encyclopedia Britannica. 2022. *Tim Berners-Lee | Biography, Education, Internet, Contributions, & Facts*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tim-Berners-Lee>> [Accessed 6 January 2022].

@cursedimage.tumblr.com: The beginnings of the cursed image

An account called @cursedimage.tumblr.com (deactivated) began posting these images and people from all over the world shared their reactions to them, as well as started sharing their own photographs which they deemed “cursed”. “At the time, I had a voyeuristic hobby of searching the archives of Flickr to look at forgotten flash photography from years in the past,” the owner of the account explains.³ The first “cursed images” were actually just ordinary pictures with that strange aura about them, only later did people begin to create photographs in hopes of them coming out “cursed”. In 2016 fans of @cursedimages noticed that shortly after the presidential elections the account had gone dark. One brave soul decided to take action, a 39-year-old Sarah dedicated their online persona (under @cursedimages.twitter.com⁴) to curating a gathering of cursed images for the general online public to enjoy after the original curator let the @cursedimages account die. This then inspired other accounts such as @darkstockphotos⁵ and @scarytoilet⁶ to further carry the legacy of providing the fans of the cursed image with these cursed delights. These images have since only been shared further, between friends and through other social media accounts, making some of the cursed images become viral. The term “going viral” means an image,

³ Artland Magazine. 2021. *Cursed Images: A Short History of The Uncanny - Artland Magazine*. [online] Available at: <<https://magazine.artland.com/cursed-images-a-short-history-of-the-uncanny/>> [Accessed 30 September 2021].

⁴ 2016. [online] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/cursedimages>> [Accessed 26 November 2021].

⁵ 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/darkstockphotos>> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

⁶ 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://twitter.com/scarytoilet>> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

video or story is being spread through social media at remarkable speed, while the term “viral” can date back to 1989 we only started using the phrase “going viral” in 2009.⁷ By simply searching the term “cursed image” on any social media platform, be it Instagram, Facebook or even Reddit, you could find a collection of some interesting images. Below you can see the “first ever cursed image”- the first image ever posted on the @cursedimages timeline.



Fig.1: the first “cursed image” posted by @cursedimages.tumblr.com.

⁷ Wonderopolis.org. 2022. *What Does It Mean To Go Viral?*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-does-it-mean-to-go-viral>> [Accessed 6 January 2022].

Fig.1 is of a person standing in a space filled with crates of tomatoes. They are holding a long, slim stick, and are wearing a visibly dirty worker's suit. Their body language implies they were not ready for this moment to be captured. The use of flash in this photograph, as well as this moment being captured seemingly without any daylight, makes the feeling of this photograph feel as though we have walked in on someone doing something private- is it this which can make the image amusing to some viewers.

As stated in the introduction, I decided to begin conducting my own interviews with people, whilst creating a list of people I wanted to interview I choose to look at whether they are a child of the internet/ a digital native⁸, if they are a fan of horror, if I know that they are a fan of the cursed image phenomenon and general age group. The first heading plays a huge part in these interviews as I feel there is a considerate divide between those of us who grew up under the influence of the internet and those who had to learn how to navigate around it when they were already adults. People who I interviewed who were children of the internet often did not need a visual aid during the interview as they were already familiar with the viral concept of the cursed image, whereas those who are digital immigrants⁹ often needed to be introduced to the concept. All of these headings gave me very different results and such a variety of insights. I've attached below the template I made and used for the interviews:

⁸ a person born after the invention of the internet who had access to it while they were growing up

⁹ someone who was born and grew up before the invention of the internet and has had to learn how to navigate around the web in adulthood

Thesis Interview Template

Name:	
Child of Internet?	
Horror Fan?	
Knows about The Cursed Image?	
Age:	

Do you know what the cursed image is? (if no provide visual aid)

What does seeing a cursed image make you feel?

-Elaborate?

Fig.2: Thesis questionnaire template

I began by asking “do you know what the cursed image is?” if the answer was yes, I asked “what do you feel looking at this kind of image?”, if the answer was no, I introduced them to the concept by showing them cursed images, I tried to get a few

different images for each interviewee. Only if the answer was no did I use the photo elicitation technique. From there on I asked them to elaborate on the part I found most interesting from their answer to the previous question. These interviews all took place in person, which I found helpful as I find there can be a barrier between us when we communicate online. I would set up my laptop in the space my interviewee and myself were, make sure there are no distractions around and begin the interviewing process.

Below is an excerpt of the very first interview conducted for this thesis:

Q: You say disgust, or terror, can you tell me why you want to keep looking at them if those are the feelings?

A: “I suppose it's very rare to have an emotional response to an image when we see so many on a regular basis on a platform such as Instagram. I think a lot of the time people our age can feel –what’s the fucking word- desensitized and disconnected. and I think looking at cursed images brings a lightheartedness and um a comedic value to photography.

I think humans are drawn to things that upset us, we have a great sense of curiosity which I think is why the likes of true crime documentaries and murder mysteries are so popular in mainstream media.”

Alan Kinsella is a 22-year-old artist and daily meme consumer who is very familiar with the cursed image. I chose to interview him first as I didn’t have to introduce him to the concept of the cursed image as they are a norm in his everyday online scroll.

Kinsella has an interesting opinion on why we want more of something that invokes a negative emotion in us, and that is simply living in the digital age and being desensitized to anything we may come across on the internet. Being a child of the internet very often means seeing things we didn’t expect or want to see as well as a

constant income of images, it becomes very easy to not feel anything at all as we come by them. His view on modern art is that it is supposed to make us feel something and, in his eyes, cursed images do that quite well- he sees cursed images as successful pieces of art.

Continuing the cursed image

While @cursedimages_2 has simply been “carrying on the important work” of @cursedimages, @darkstockphotos and @scarytoilet have taken inspiration from @cursedimages and made it something their own. Andy Kelly, the owner of @darkstockphotos searches the internet in order to find stock images that are of unusual settings, things you wouldn’t expect there to be stock images for.

In the depths of these sites, 30 pages into a search, I started noticing images that weren't like the others; images that were darker and more disturbing, illustrating some really heavy subject matter, but still fundamentally absurd, Kelly explained. And so, I decided to start collecting some of the weirdest, darkest, and most bewildering I found and posting them on Twitter.¹⁰

Kelly is interested in these stock images because they try to tackle serious issues yet miss the mark completely, which can evoke an emotional response, perhaps a positive one, from a viewer to see a stock photograph with the Getty watermark of a man

¹⁰ Mashable. 2022. *The complex allure of cursed images*. [online] Available at: <<https://mashable.com/article/cursed-images-twitter-accounts-toilets-dark-stock-photos>> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

photoshopped behind himself while holding a large brick, ready to strike himself in the head. While being interviewed for this article by Mashed, Kelly mentioned he often receives DMs (direct messages) from his followers with messages of appreciation, as his posts break up the sad reality of the world we see through our Twitter feeds.¹¹ Seeing negative climate change updates and reading what politicians, authors, athletes or other have to say about human rights can really bring you down but seeing a post by @darkstockphotos might take you out of that headspace, which is what most cursed images do on social media. Being connected to the entire population via mobile phone often means constant updates from every corner of the world, and as we know, tragedy just keeps happening to the human race- sometimes it is self-inflicted. We can be quite self-destructive. But we can also be uplifting, sometimes this is through things such as cursed images.

¹¹ Mashable. 2022. *The complex allure of cursed images*. [online] Available at: <<https://mashable.com/article/cursed-images-twitter-accounts-toilets-dark-stock-photos>> [Accessed 3 January 2022].



Fig.3: Getty images photoshopped stock photo of a man preparing to hit himself with a rock, sourced from @darkstockphotos.twitter.com

Fig.3 is of a man standing behind his photoshop doppelgänger preparing to strike himself in the head while the doppelgänger is blissfully unaware. The watermark, which reads “Getty images,” implies this is a professionally taken stock photograph. Implying this image was made for professional use can make it quite comical to come viewers.

As for @scarytoilets, it started with a single night in a “particularly bad nightclub” for 24-year-old Phil to begin the journey of documenting toilets with a certain scary aura

about them. Phil posted a couple of these pictures on Facebook, and after getting an impressive amount of attention he then migrated to Twitter. “When I set it up it seemed quite funny to explore something so incongruous,” Phil said. “And when I delved into the wealth of images that are relevant to the topic... it just became even more entertaining.”¹²

The account now runs on images sourced from the DMs Phil receives daily from fans and followers sharing their obsession with these images of dark and uneasy thrones, both fan-made and found.

¹²Mashable. 2022. *The complex allure of cursed images*. [online] Available at: <<https://mashable.com/article/cursed-images-twitter-accounts-toilets-dark-stock-photos>> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

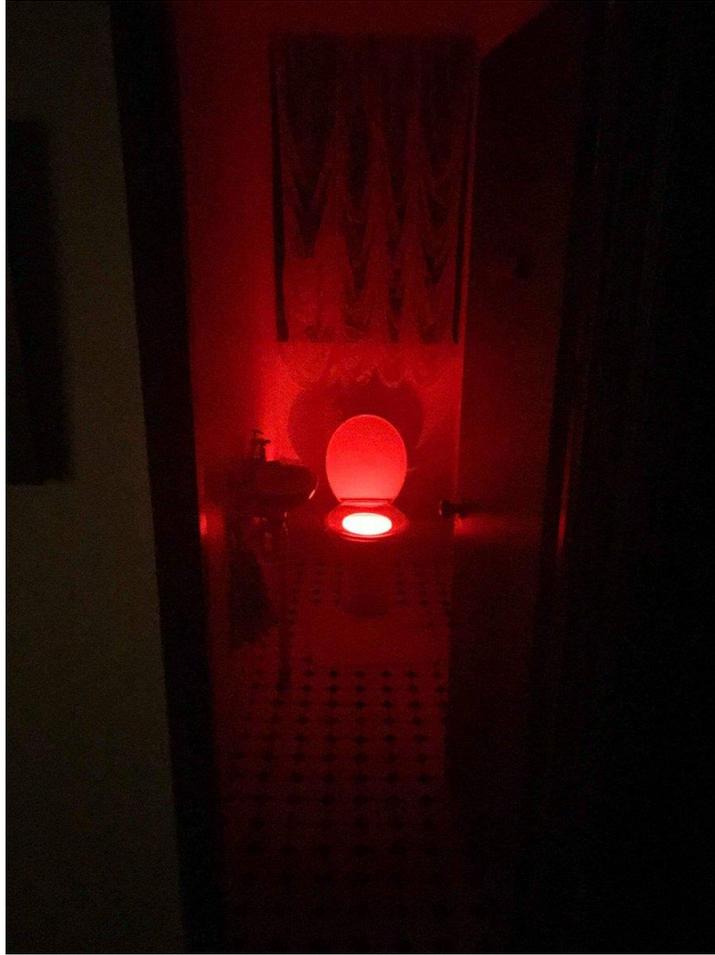


Fig.4: a photograph of a toilet with light emerging from the bowl, sourced from [@scarytoilet.twitter.com](https://twitter.com/scarytoilet).

Fig.4 depicts a toilet (possibly public, considering its origin story above) with a light source coming directly from the bowl. The idea of this being a public restroom in a nightclub might be humorous to fans of such imagery.

Identifying features and meaning of the cursed image

These images don't have a lot in common, most of the time they are unedited low-quality photographs without one creator, they vary in subject matter, composition and setting. The one thing uniting them all is the aura of discomfort and confusion. It becomes a herculean task to try give the cursed image an overall label or recipe as the subject matter can be potentially anything as long as it causes the viewer to question the photograph: i.e., what events caused this picture to be taken? How did these characters end up in this setting? What happened and why does this photograph exist?

A common theme within the realm of cursed images is juxtaposition: putting objects that we would associate with one setting into another, a simple example of this would be food in non-food spaces, or perhaps people dressed in certain attire being present in a setting that doesn't correlate with the clothing. Doing so instantly throws the viewer off and makes them want to know more, to figure the picture out. This air of confusion and discomfort makes them so popular, as people want to know more about something they don't understand or are afraid of. Cursed images are quite simple to create, yet many of them are not taken for this purpose, a large number of cursed images are simply regular photographs accidentally taken in such a manner which deems them "cursed." Another key theme of the cursed image might dark empty rooms, mannequins and costumes- all of these were listed by the original owner of [@cursedimages.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/cursedimages).



Fig.5: a hand of bananas taking a shower, sourced from [@cursedimages_2.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/@cursedimages_2).

Fig.5 is of a hand of bananas in a shower, the bananas are suspended in such a way that it seems as though they are taking this shower on their own. The water that hits off them, as well as the poor lighting, which seems to be camera flash in a dark setting, really gives a feeling of us walking into a bathroom which is being used. Food is not an item which usually makes an appearance in the bathroom, which makes this an example of juxtaposition as well as out-of-placeness.



Fig.6: a person dressed as a wizard in a rural setting, sourced from
[@cursedimages_2.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/@cursedimages_2).

Fig.6 is of a person dressed as a wizard in a rural setting, we can see a person holding a camera on the left of the picture, an open door to an older building, a flowerpot and water fountain. This wizard seems really out of place, especially as we are aware this picture is taken at night. Juxtaposition takes place in the form of wrong object in

wrong place in both photographs, giving them an aura of confusion: “why is –this object/person- here?”

The effect of the cursed image

An article from Artland discusses how the cursed images have that aura of eeriness about them. They touch on how when the five W’s aren’t present, we are left with more questions than answers, if we do not know who, what, why, where and when, what do we know?¹³ That animal instinct of curiosity is what keeps us engaged with these images. The fewer answers and more questions we have the more likely we are to want to know more about what we are being presented with. Below is a direct quote from the owner of @cursedimages.tumblr.com on their take on the effect of the cursed image:

Some of these forgotten photographs just had an eerie mood about them, like someone had captured a moment from a dream or another life. I was particularly interested in finding photos of dark and empty rooms, mannequins and costumes, all of which became common themes among cursed images.

¹³ Artland Magazine. 2021. *Cursed Images: A Short History of The Uncanny - Artland Magazine*. [online] Available at: <<https://magazine.artland.com/cursed-images-a-short-history-of-the-uncanny/>> [Accessed 30 September 2021].

The evolution of the cursed image: creepypasta

One can speculate whether creepypastas paved the way for cursed images too.

Creepypastas were short horror stories that were sent around the web, much like chainmail or chain letters, which date back millennia. These stories would accommodate both horror and humor, and often explore tales of supernatural nature. These stories would make people feel, and when people feel they share. Often these stories came with a message of something along the lines of *“if you do not send this to 10 people the –insert monster- will be under your bed tonight”* so the readers were compelled to share in order to escape this fate. These chainmails were sent around, just like cursed images, with the intent of sharing this strange experience and feeling with someone we know as well as making sure we are not haunted by the monster of the story that night. The feeling of *“what the fuck am I looking at... I must share this with a friend”* as well as the threat of being haunted is overpowering.

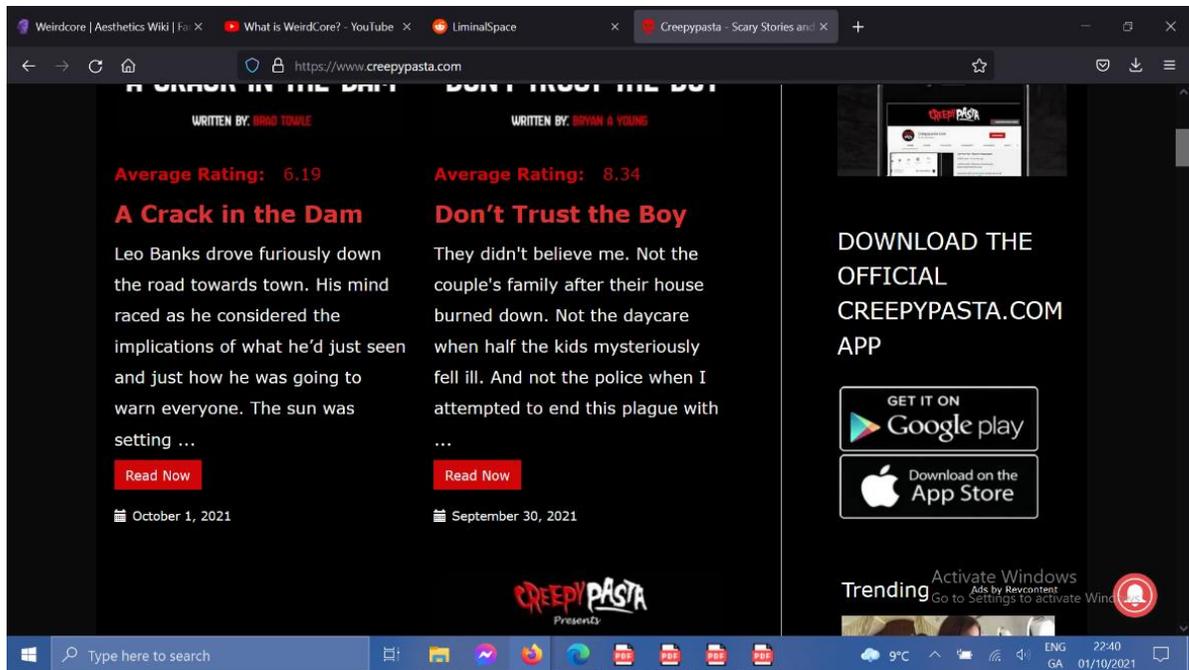


Fig.7: Official creepypasta website www.creepypasta.com

The evolution of the cursed image: weirdcore

Another realm of cursed images are things under the title of weirdcore. Weirdcore is an aesthetic describing images with strange energies or auras. There is no clear time of origin, but it is suspected these images began their journey into our cumulative online lives around the early 00's. Here's a definition from Fandom.com:

Weirdcore is an online aesthetic and art movement centered around amateur or low-quality photography and/or digital graphics that have been constructed or edited to convey feelings of confusion, disorientation, alienation, and nostalgia or anemoia.¹⁴

¹⁴ Aesthetics Wiki. 2021. *Weirdcore*. [online] Available at: <<https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Weirdcore>> [Accessed 3 October 2021].

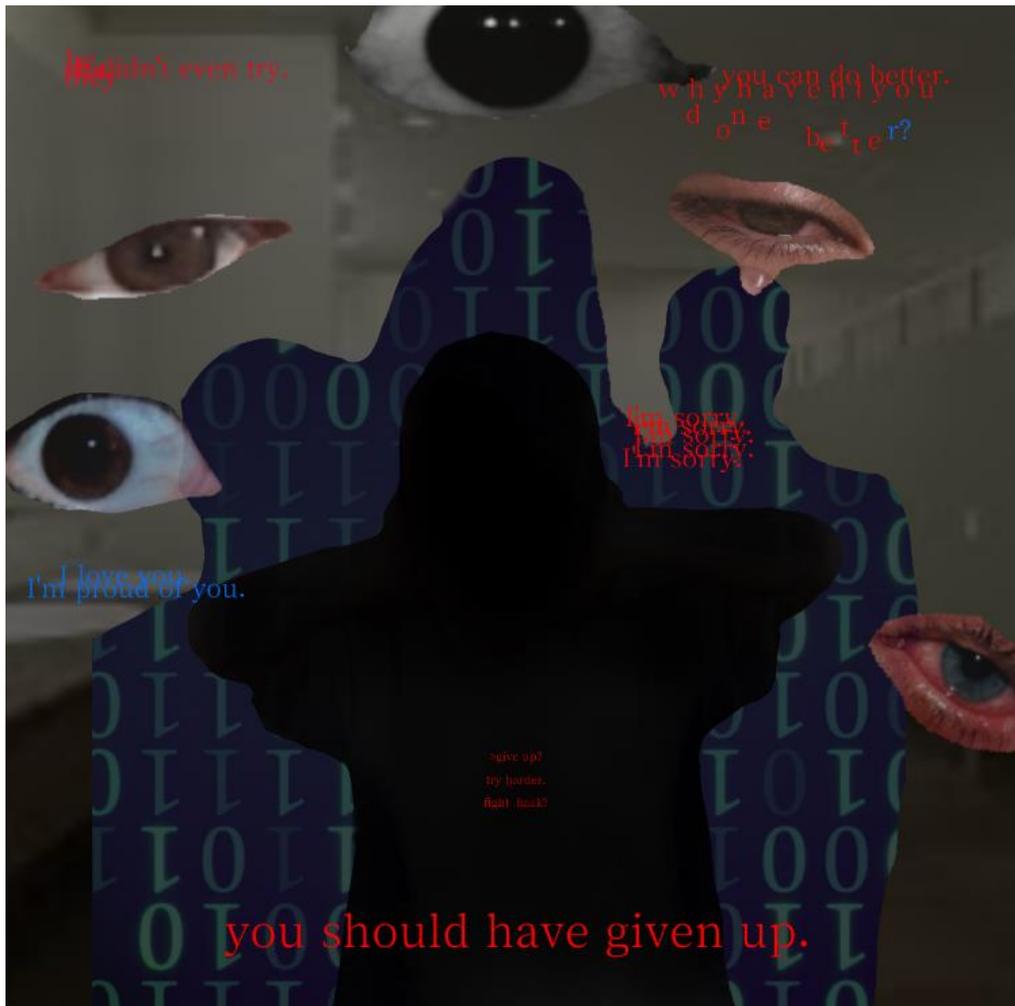


Fig.8: photo-collage of human eyes, human-like shadows and text.



Fig.9: image of a kitchen paired with a shine circle and text.

These images, or “edits” are mostly of liminal spaces matched with text that is vague in nature. Instagram is possibly the best place to go searching for weirdcore content, as much as its origin is unknown, it is alive and well there. Several accounts take after both Tumblr and Twitter accounts, @cursedimage, and are dedicated to creating and sharing weirdcore edits for the entire online community to enjoy. These accounts have been gaining popularity in recent years and it only makes you wonder why? Why are images that make us feel eeriness or anemoia circulating the web at such speed and volume?

The text in these edits isn't necessary for it to be a weirdcore edit, but where it is present it is usually vague and even ominous in nature. Phrases like “do you know how to get out?” or “we know about what you did” are a very common occurrence, but also ones such as “we love and support you” and “you are safe here” aren't unheard of either. The main goal of the text is eeriness, regardless of positive or negative intent.

The evolution of the cursed image: liminal space

Some fans of weirdcore believe that this trend took its roots from r/liminalspace Reddit.¹⁵ R/liminalspace is a tag on reddit where people upload pictures of spaces which they call liminal. These uploads always have a strange aura about them, the places in these photographs are ones you wouldn't want to find yourself in alone. They are of long corridors, basements, rooms and other unoccupied spaces, many fans say that these places are a physical manifestation of purgatory. Seeing pictures of these places makes the viewer feel the perfect balance between serenity and anxiety. Peaceful yet sinister.

¹⁵ <https://www.reddit.com/r/LiminalSpace/>



Fig.10: image of “liminal space” sourced from [r/liminalspace@reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/liminalspace)

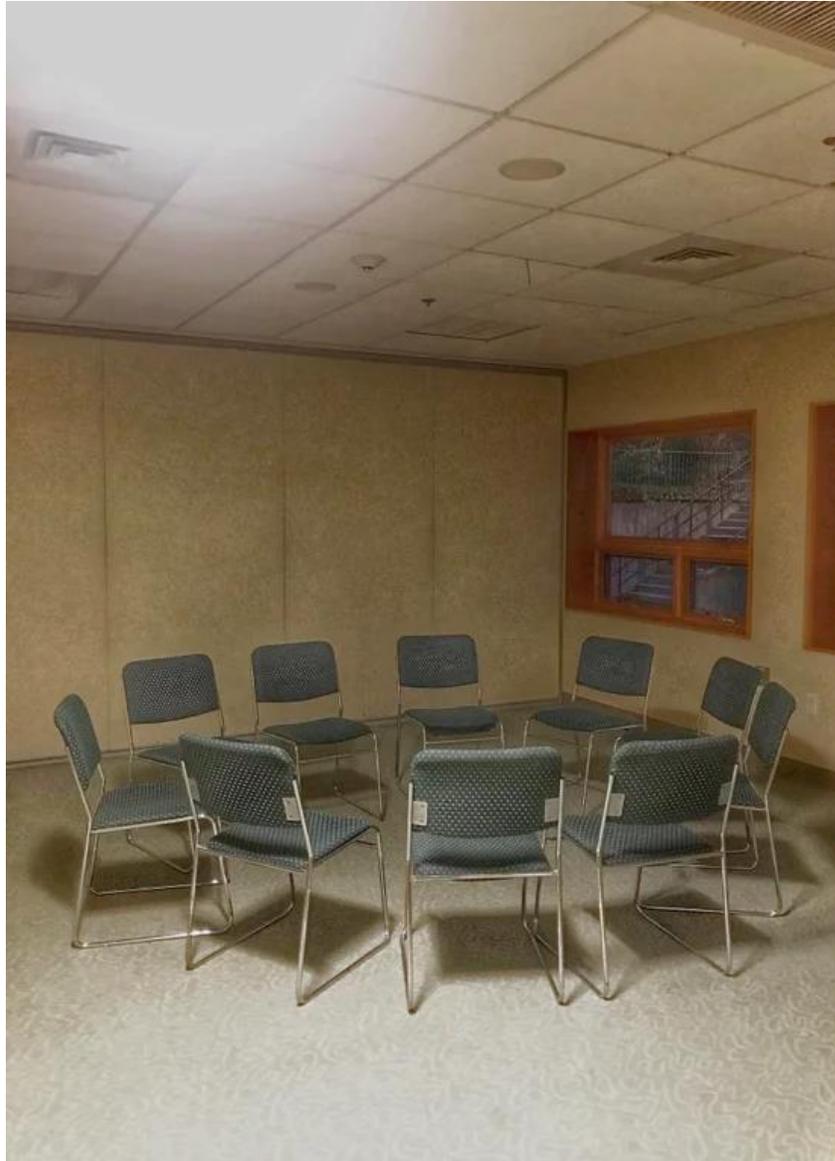


Fig.11: image of “liminal space” sourced from [r/liminalspace@reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/liminalspace)

Conclusion

This chapter has brought us through the brief history of the online phenomenon known as the cursed image. It has shown the beginning with @cursedimages.tumblr.com, the progression of the account and how the fans took over in times of need. It went into detail of what influence the original account has had on the fans of such content and how they expanded the realm of cursed memes into different facets. It looked into the recurring features of the cursed image: juxtaposition, accidental photography, out-of-placeness, dark empty rooms, etc. The effect of the cursed image has been shocking and/or confusing the viewer, but hasn't that been the goal of shock art for as long as it has existed? Now that I have explored the story of the cursed image- where it began and where it is now, let's take a look at how in essence it has existed for much longer than the internet trend.

Chapter 2: The Essence of The Cursed Image in Art History

Introduction

Modern cursed images are mostly associated with the internet, but one can argue that many artists have touched this field far before we all had PCs. Surrealist artists like Hans Bellmer, Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman and even Max Slobboda have created photographic works of art in order to shock, confuse and even cause discomfort to the viewer for decades. The main effect of a cursed image is making the viewer feel a sense of discomfort, and while we do, why is it that we can't look away? The mind is repulsed by what it sees and yet wants to keep seeing.

Throughout art history artists have used shock as a main theme or tool in their work. Some speculate whether the beginning of shock art began with artists such as Marcel Duchamp, or R.Mutt if you like, and his urinal, or did it really begin at the very start of art itself. Society constantly changes and evolves, and our values change, taking this into account means that art has always been shocking if done correctly and in fashion, if you will. Avant-garde is a term in fine art which describes artworks and artists as “ahead of their time.”¹⁶ It can be quite a task to pin down what exactly the avant-garde is, as it always must be new, and it can be hard to decide what will be influential in the art world simply because it is new, and perhaps shocking or unaccepted at the time.

For example, Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* and just how controversial and shocking it was for an artist to paint prostitutes at the time proves how when things change, we aren’t as shocked anymore.

¹⁶ Visual-arts-cork.com. 2022. *Avant-Garde Art: Definition, Meaning, History*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/definitions/avant-garde-art.htm>> [Accessed 11 January 2022].

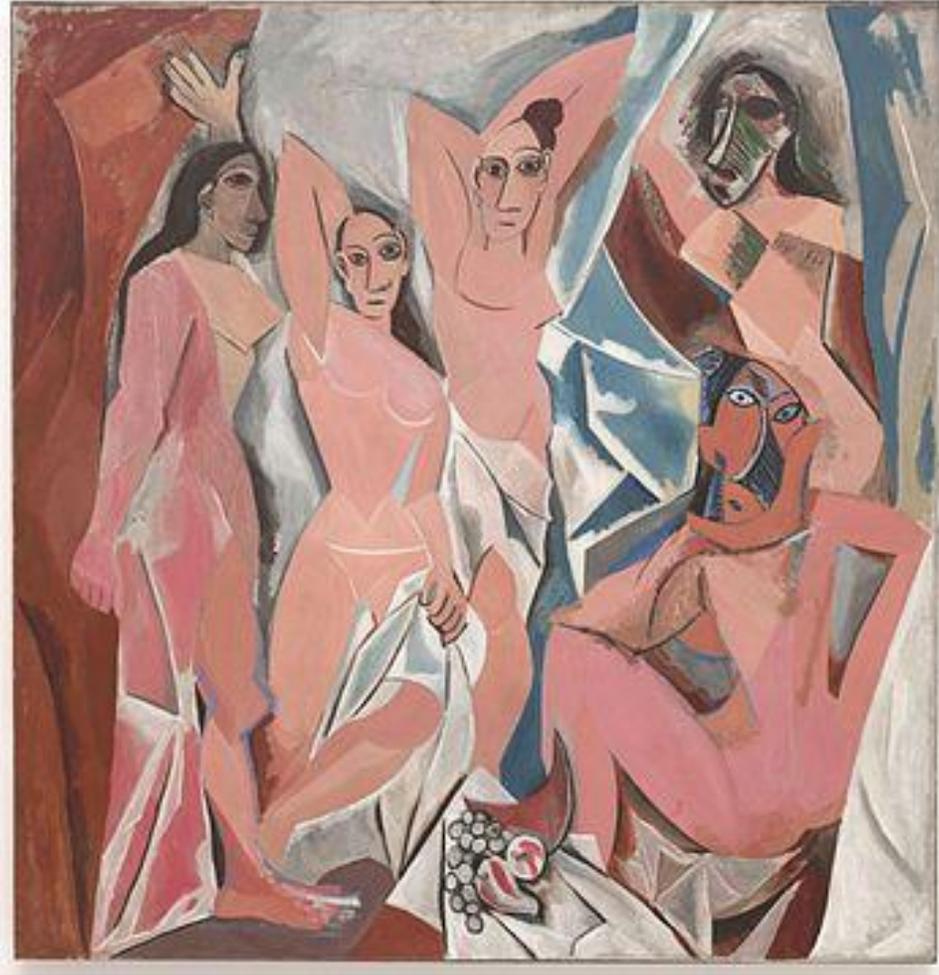


Fig.12: Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, oil on canvass, 243.9 cm × 233.7 cm

Taking this into account we can see how shock art must be a constantly evolving practice, it must keep up with societies' expectations in order to outrun them. That being said, some art pieces have stayed shocking to its viewers for as long as they've existed, below are a few examples of this:

Hans Bellmer

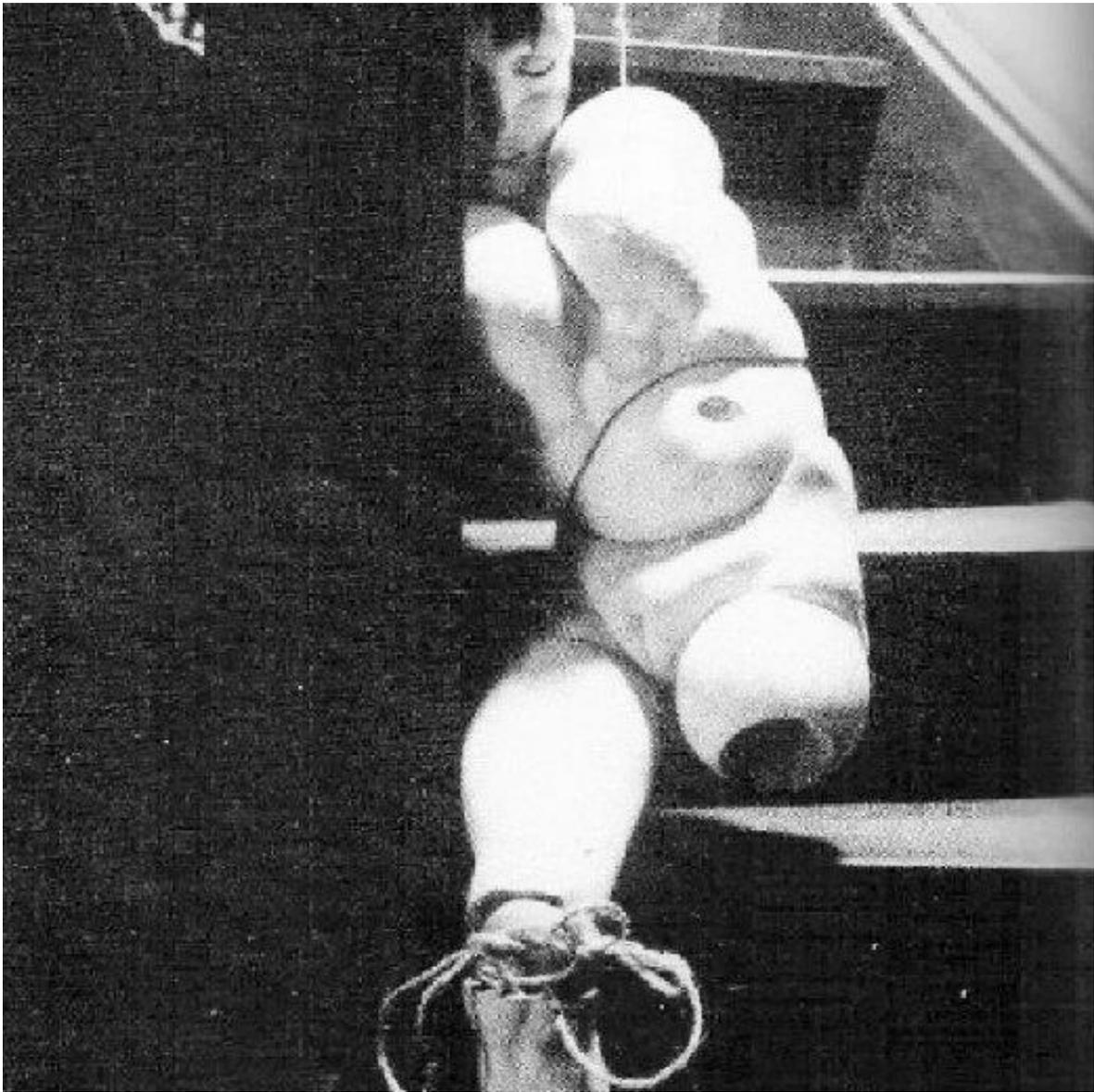


Fig.13: Hans Bellmer, *Le Poupee*, life sized sculpture of humanesque doll made with wood, plaster and metal, 1933-35.

Hans Bellmer was a surrealist photographer. He made a large wood, metal and paper mâché doll which he then put into various poses and photographed. These images are uncomfortable to view. They present something which looks like a human body, which we are taught from a young age is something we should look away from as nudity is frowned upon and can even be a criminal offence. Viewing a humanesque creature held up by rope, bent in uncomfortable ways and mostly missing limbs makes one feel discomfort without doubt. This doll was modeled after the look of a pubescent girl which makes the images even harder to look at, and yet we do. There is a linger of comfort in discomfort, and a sliver of curiosity in fear.

In her thesis, Dina A. El-Sioufi writes about sexuality, perversion and discovery in *The Doll*. She writes:

“Bataille believes eroticism to be a means for the individual to break free from the confines of his being which isolate him from Being as the totality of existence and the whole world.”¹⁷

¹⁷ El-Sioufi, D., n.d. *HANS BELLMER & THE EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE*.



Fig14: Hans Bellmer, *Le Poupee*, life sized sculpture of humanesque doll made with wood, plaster and metal, 1933-35.

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Reading *The Doll* through the lens of this statement it becomes clear how Bellmer is exploring some erotic fantasies by making this artwork. He works on the doll for

years, constantly changing and reworking it, exchanging body parts for ball joints- making it possible to access certain of the dolls parts in way you couldn't before. Bellmer explores this taboo area of eroticism through making of the doll, allowing himself to do anything he wishes to the doll as it is his creation and inanimate. Subjects of taboo are near impossible to discuss in social circles and the art world gives people freedom to experiment and expand on their strange thoughts and feelings- which brings us back to why we want to keep looking. Artworks can touch on thoughts we have that we feel we cannot express to the general public, we feel we are in a safe space where we can discuss these thoughts. We look for a space to be understood. The shock factor in this piece is that the viewer doesn't think it may be appropriate to delve into this subject, as it is taboo, while some viewers never get past the shock, the ones that do feel desire to see and understand more. Repulsion followed by curiosity and desire.

Diane Arbus



Fig.15: Diane Arbus, *A Jewish Giant at Home with his Parents in the Bronx, New York*, black and white photograph, 1970.

Diane Arbus spent her life and career photographing the Other, those looked down upon and outcasts. Her portraits often put those people in a different light than they are usually portrayed in, which can be uneasy to view. Arbus spent a lot of time with

circus crews and documented everyone as her equals, she never othered them like society often did. Her photos of Eddie the giant with his family or her untitled series (1970-1971) are very good examples of this, where we can see there's fondness and warmth between Arbus and her subjects. These photographs make viewers uncomfortable as we are taught from an early age to Stop Staring and “*Not Talk to That Disabled Man*” by all kinds of adults, whereas Arbus teaches us that these are just people, like you and me.

In an article by The Smithsonian Magazine we have a quote from Arbus: “I always thought of photography as a naughty thing to do—that was one of my favorite things about it, and when I first did it, I felt very perverse,”¹⁹ Seeing the act of photography as a “naughty thing to do” alters how we look at these images, as she sees them as a pervasive act, just like Bellmer she is exploring taboo. She is exploring her subjects under a bright light for everyone to see and viewers find this uncomfortable. The same article then goes to quote the senior curator of photography at MOMA, where the first major show took place after Arbus’ death:

People hadn’t seen an unambiguous picture of a man in curlers with long fingernails smoking a cigarette, and at the time it seemed confrontational. Now, at this distance in time, it seems elegiac and empathetic rather than threatening.

¹⁹ Magazine, S., 2021. *A Fresh Look at Diane Arbus*. [online] Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-fresh-look-at-diane-arbus-99861134/>> [Accessed 13 November 2021].

Phillips touches on how the shock becomes confusion in its own time, how instead of feeling threatened by the photographs were provided with by Arbus we feel something closer to appreciation.



Fig.16: Diane Arbus, *A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, New York City*, black and white photograph, 1966.

Cindy Sherman



Fig.17: Cindy Sherman, *untitled #92*, coloured photograph, 1981.

Cindy Sherman's untitled film stills have caused the viewers concern for the characters in them. Sherman poses herself as these people in scenes of discomfort which lead you to wonder what happened before this image was taken, what events led to this still existing and is the character we are viewing alright. These people are often somehow dirty, have ripped clothes, are visibly tired and sweaty, as though they have just been through some traumatic event. It's interesting to note how our brains react to these pieces, because we are aware that this is a made-up character in a made-up scene and no one is being harmed, and yet our brains still speculate about the wellbeing of

this imaginary person. These stills were taken in a horizontal manner, as to mimic a glossy magazine centerfold. This could be a play on how we often view celebrities in glamorous shots in these glossy magazines, and now our attention is on this character who seems to be distressed and/or hurt but is shown to us in the same format. An article from Hero Magazine:

Though they were ultimately rejected by the magazine's editors for their perceived ambivalence (one photograph of a disheveled blonde woman in bed with the sheets pulled under her chin was interpreted as suggestive of rape), the power of these coloured works is their implicit ability to reflect the viewers' own desires.²⁰

The artworks were rejected as the magazine decided they were inappropriate, but as the article states, it is only because of the viewers' perception of them. These images made the viewers uncomfortable as they were touching on subjects which are considered ugly- i.e., rape. This artist again is touching on matters which can be considered taboo and are not supposed to be talked about even though they are of importance. The viewers are shocked and/or confused as they are presented with subject matter that we have been taught shouldn't be spoken of.

²⁰ Hero. 2021. *Cindy Sherman: subverting the voyeuristic male gaze with beauty and violence – HERO*. [online] Available at: <<https://hero-magazine.com/article/177073/cindy-sherman>> [Accessed 13 November 2021].



Fig.18: Cindy Sherman, *untitled #93*, coloured photograph, 1981.

Max Slobodda



Fig.19: Max Slobodda, selected coloured photograph from *Stranger Things* collection, 2017-present.

Max Slobboda is a photographer and in my opinion is the perfect example of modern cursed images created through an art lens. His series “stranger things” deals with confusing the viewer and creating snapshots that look as though they were taken in a non-earth space.

Man expects a logical explanation for everything he sees in this world. If there’s not an immediate explanation, he is forced to grapple with perception, question his beliefs, and form his own conclusion about what he has perceived. It is extremely difficult for man to accept the idea that there are still unanswered questions in this world. In this day and age, is it even possible to accept an unknown as truth?

To view the previously unimaginable as fact?²¹

Slobodda talks about how people expect immediate explanation for what they see, and how not getting that shakes their perception of what they know about what they are seeing. Noting this as our comfort zone we can see why seeing something like a cursed image can and will make us uncomfortable. He also touches on how hard we find taking things that were previously unknown to us as new facts, and how our acceptance of something new isn't too great. It causes us discomfort as we are viewing something we can't comprehend.

In “Stranger Things” my goal is to let the incomprehensible remain that way. My aim is simply to let the viewer engage with the images without any guidelines or preconceived explanations, letting their imagination run wild. My hope is that they will form their own answers about these photos, or, ideally, engage with the work emotionally and let the unknown remain unknown.

²¹ Slobodda.de. 2021. *Max Slobodda | Stranger Things*. [online] Available at: <<https://slobodda.de/projekte/stranger-things>> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

Slobodda wants the viewers' imagination run wild as they view his work and, in a way, it must as there are little to no answers. His imagery is very otherworldly even though it is of everyday objects and human models. Sobodda's excessive use of flash creates this mood which I can only describe as being close to an alien encounter.



Fig.20: Max Slobodda, selected coloured photograph from *Stranger Things* collection, 2017-present.

Conclusion

What connects these artists is their ability to shock and/or confuse their audience. All four artists have built a reputation for themselves through shocking their audiences with each piece, but as time moved on and we have been desensitized by the internet and its many scary places, these pieces become more about confusion rather than fear. The invention of the internet in 1989 has led the Earth to be able to connect from every corner, and let people become creators as well as curators of online content. With everyone having access to the web 24/7 via their mobile phone we can intake a rather great amount of information every single day, and once you are fed this amount of content you become desensitized. This may be why we cannot look away: to feel something. Quoting Scaring Away Anxiety:

Some modern scholars argue that people do not actually enjoy the negative emotions themselves, but rather the curiosity that is aroused from the unfamiliar. However, others have argued that people can enjoy negative emotions themselves rather than simply tolerate them as collateral damage for curiosity.²²

Curiosity. Humans are very curious creatures. It is what keeps us engaged in horror movies even though we are afraid to keep watching them- we want to know more.

This chapter has investigated shock art through a chosen group of artists who all use shock as a tool in their practice. It has looked at shock art changes as society progresses and wondered whether shock art will eventually die as we run out of taboo subjects. There were links made between subjects which are frowned upon and these artists' practices, and how they are exploring the things we are not to talk about. Shock

²² Scrivner, C. and Christensen, K., n.d. Scaring away anxiety: Therapeutic avenues for horror fiction to enhance treatment for anxiety symptoms.

art is something which lets us express our thoughts towards the unspoken truths of society, we begin to wonder if cursed images are the same.

Chapter 3: The Psychological Analysis of The Cursed Image

Introduction

Here the discussion takes a more psychological standpoint on why we want to keep looking at cursed images: looking at how we as animals engage with an invention such as an internet trend- how does it affect us to engage with cursed images? Investigating our responses through theories such as the car crash theory, fight-or-flight responses, the uncanny and uncanny valley phenomenon.

Why do we want to keep looking: the car crash theory

An article written by Coltan Scrivner for ‘Psychology today’ touches on The Car Crash Theory:

The Roman gladiatorial games. The presence of death in rituals and religion. The spectacle of public executions. The massive fan base surrounding the true crime and horror genres. Coloring each of these phenomena is a tendency for humans to be morbidly curious.²³

As humans we are incredibly curious creatures and that trait of ours can be traced back to our survival instincts. The car crash theory looks at how when a tragedy (like a car

²³ Psychology Today. 2022. *What Is Morbid Curiosity?*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/morbid-minds/202102/what-is-morbid-curiosity>> [Accessed 6 January 2022].

crash) takes place, and despite the fact you know that it is an awful thing to happen, you cannot help your inner need to be curious and it is hard to look away.

Morbid curiosity is something humans are not a stranger to - when is the last time you couldn't stop paying attention to something disturbing? This may have been a movie with concerning and/or scary content, a video of a person getting hurt or maybe an actual car crash. The science behind this is pretty simple: we want to learn in order to avoid.²⁴ Psychologists who were interviewed for the article mentioned above have discussed how we as animals constantly assess situations in order to avoid harm, taking for example the event of seeing a crashed car on the side of a highway, it is only natural to want to find out what happened, learn from it and figure out how to avoid this fate ourselves. Being aware that a crash happened and driving the rest of the day on high alert is a natural response.

An article written by Matt Moen for 'Paper' magazine spoke about our relationship with these images and why we always want more:

Unable to parse whether a cursed image poses a threat to us, our fight-or-flight response stutters and leaves us trapped between the two, recoiling but transfixed. Not scary in the traditional sense of inducing mortal terror, the cursed image poses more of an existential threat to our sense of self, challenging our sanity with its various flavors of creepy, eerie and uncanny scenarios.²⁵

²⁴ Psychology Today. 2022. *What Is Morbid Curiosity?*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/morbid-minds/202102/what-is-morbid-curiosity>> [Accessed 6 January 2022].

²⁵ 2021. [online] Available at: <<https://www.papermag.com/cursed-images-break-the-internet-2641552996.html?rebelltitem=28#rebelltitem28>> [Accessed 30 September 2021].

They touch on our fight-or-flight response, how we respond to these images as animals, how we get stuck between giving into the curiosity or the fear. They mention our sense of sanity and how the world is ever-changing and so confusing, and how these images make us feel safe in knowing we aren't the only ones going insane.



Fig.21: a person eating a sandwich with a human baby in it, sourced from [@cursedimages.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/@cursedimages).

Fig.21 is an example of a cursed image. The picture shows an adult pretending to eat a sandwich with a human baby filling; they are holding the sandwich over a plate in a kitchen-looking setting. The picture is well-lit, taken with flash, well thought out compositionally, nothing is fully in or out of frame, making the feel of the photograph uncomfortable. The effort put into staging this photograph suggests it wasn't an accidentally created cursed image, but an image taken in order to be cursed purposefully.



Fig.22: a cat wearing a human-like mask, sourced from @cursedimages.tumblr.com.

Fig.22 is of a cat on a soft surface wearing a human-like doll face as a mask. The cat's back paws, and position of ears suggests the cat is a tad confused, as though the person taking the picture gently forced this animal into co-operation. The picture is taken against light and poorly, the cat's full figure is not in the photograph creating the same effect as before mentioned Fig.21.

In both of the above images the feeling of curiosity may take hold, particularly if you are the type of person who would deliver a reaction that is typical of those sensitive to the needs of children, and if you are the type who may question a sense of danger towards a child or animal. The staged picture containing the child in a sandwich naturally created a concerned reaction for some, yet as is consistent with the car crash theory the urge to keep looking was strong as the need to analyze the action that may have led up to this image being taken, and maybe even figure out a way to make sure we never meet the same fate. A similar reaction may be drawn from the image of the cat, as the presence of the baby doll head leads to questions- who forced the cat to cooperate for this photograph? Did they harm the animal in the process? Is the animal in any distress? And in the event of the cat being hurt- how do we make sure this doesn't happen again?

Desensitization and the cursed image

Considering again what one of the responders from my informal interviews observed, we are so desensitized, and we want to feel something while looking at art.

Comfortably Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others is a study done on how humans react to seeing/hearing people in need of help, and how fast they would react depending on whether they played the violent or non-violent video games.²⁶ Subjects of this study which played the violent video game responded far slower, if at all, when they were experiencing someone else being hurt. This is a perfect example of how desensitization works, the subjects who have been intaking violent content were far more acclimatized to the experience of hearing cries for help and did not feel the need to respond to real life threats. Which comes to directly contradict the car crash theory, so are we looking at cursed images to avoid the fate of the moment which has been captured or are we looking at them to feel something while looking at an image?

Desensitization therapy is a type of behavioral therapy based on gradual conditioning, making the subjects overcome a phobia by being gradually introduced to their phobias in stages in order to acclimatize. You begin to see a link between the subjects being affected negatively by violent video games in relation to helping others and how some viewers of the cursed image feel close to nothing when they encounter them due to desensitization. This brings us to question whether while society moves forward will shock art die? Will we ever accept what is considered taboo or find different subjects to shock our viewers with?

Looking at the different responses I got in my interviews with people I could see how very differently people who didn't know about the cursed image responded to them in

²⁶ 2009. *Comfortably Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others*.

contrast to those who know and regularly enjoy the cursed image. While being interviewed M.Burton gave an interesting insight into how he views the cursed image:

I don't understand why... em in this case something which usually brings joy has to be changed so I look at it and say, 'what the fuck.' Like the micky mouse and the dog, originally when I seen that I thought it was a melted version from Chernobyl or something. Obviously when I look at it more, I start to realize what it is but when you expect a good thing and see it ruined, it's a bit annoying. Em..I don't see the point in trying to ruin something which is already in our brains as fun, maybe from our childhood which is why I was a little startled.

As we can see this response is very different from Kinsella's, who enjoys cursed images near to daily. Burton isn't a person who surfs the web very often and was introduced to the concept of a cursed image for the first time while being interviewed by me, and his response was filled with repulsion rather than wonder, and certainly not appreciation- similarly, to when A.Byrne was interviewed. Byrne expressed she was reminded of nightmares when she seen cursed images and didn't want to view them anymore. Both of these people didn't grow up on the same parts of the internet as myself and do not feel a pull towards the cursed image, and this shows a variety in the level of desensitization towards certain disturbing experiences that these images often convey.

Why do we want to keep looking: the uncanny valley

Another concept I wished to explore is the uncanny valley, which is a term used to explain our emotional relationship with things that are almost human, but not quite,

coined by Masahiro Mori in the 1970s.²⁷ This felt like an interesting theory to bring into discussion as no matter how much we dislike humanoid objects we keep making them- just like we keep looking at cursed images. Uncanny valley comes from the theory of the uncanny, however it focuses on the dip in the graph on which a human is met with non-human forms, human forms and everything in-between. Below is the mentioned graph:

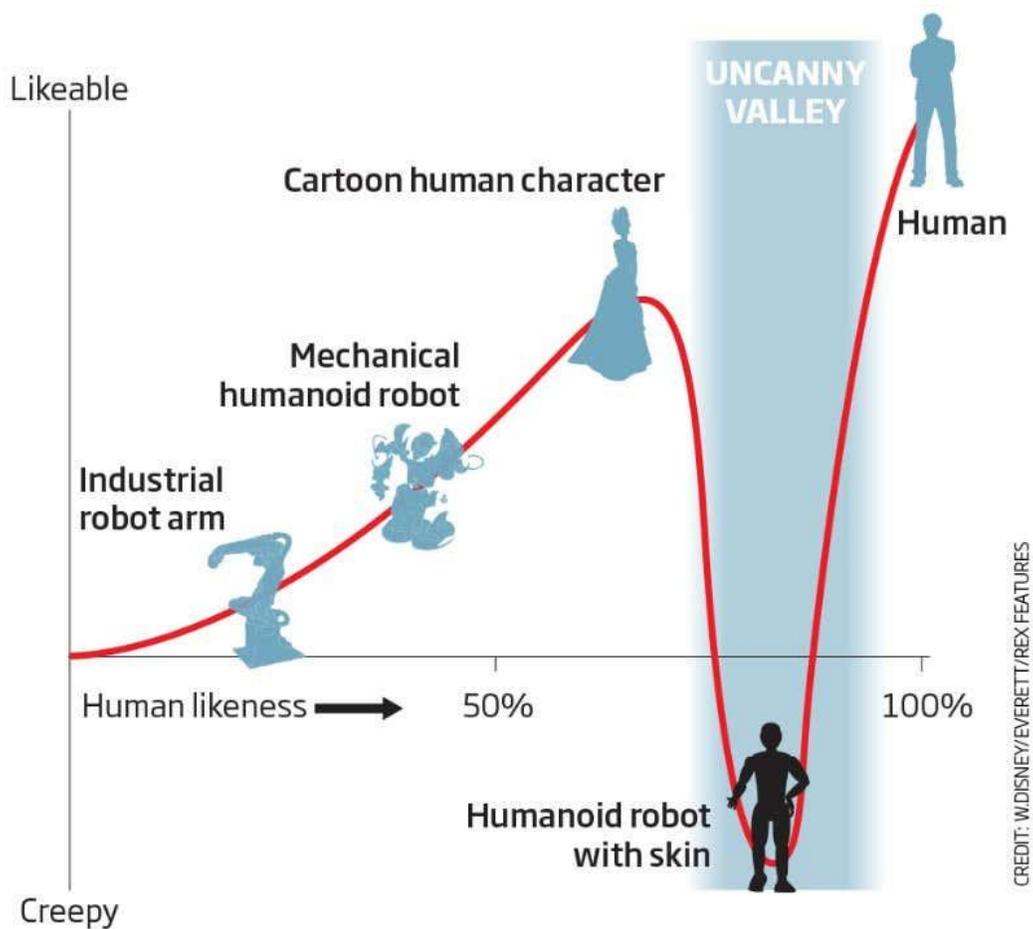


Fig.23: The Uncanny Valley graph.

²⁷ IEEE Spectrum. 2022. *What Is the Uncanny Valley?*. [online] Available at: <<https://spectrum.ieee.org/what-is-the-uncanny-valley>> [Accessed 11 January 2022].

When a person is met by a doll, perhaps one like Bellmer's, robot or other man-made creature that isn't human but acts or looks as though it is we are met with a sense of unease and discomfort. Some say this is because our sense of mortality is being threatened as we are organisms which will inevitably wither and die, and these creatures, which possess human qualities, aren't alive and will not die. Others argue we feel discomfort because we are viewing a human being who looks as though they are unwell and are rendered incapable of acting like a healthy human unit. An article from Springer argues that these almost-human creatures pose a threat to our human uniqueness and even the continuation of the human race.²⁸

If these are our feelings towards artificial intelligence, why do we keep trying to make better robots? Angela Tinwell writes in 'Uncanny Valley in Games and Animation' about ways to improve how we animate avatars in video games and characters in animation in order to cause less of the uncanny valley effect and make these characters feel more fleshed out and real.²⁹ She strives to get to the root of why some 3D renders of human characters make us feel uneasy and act on that information in order to make characters kinder to the viewer's eyes and soul. The question really is are we ever

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2021. [online] Available at: <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12369-016-0338-y>> [Accessed 3 October 2021].

²⁹ ResearchGate. 2021. *The Uncanny Valley in Games and Animation | Request PDF*. [online] Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270215574_The_Uncanny_Valley_in_Games_and_Animati on> [Accessed 1 October 2021].

going to achieve the point of comfort with AI? Will we ever create a manmade image of ourselves that doesn't make us feel existential dread?

Freud quotes Sanders, in his book *The Uncanny*: "according to him everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light," which is an interesting sentiment when one looks at the uncanny valley phenomenon.³⁰ Does this imply we weren't supposed to see these almost human creatures or cursed images? Is our brain trying to tell us something?

Considering Freud's theory of the uncanny it is easy to see how cursed images are so easily frightening and interesting, a direct quote reads: "Uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind, and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."³¹ Cursed images are never of things we haven't seen before, they are almost always of everyday settings and objects, and yet they cause such an emotional response in humans. In the original text Freud uses the terms 'Heimliche' and 'Unheimliche', which directly translate to homely and unhomely from German to English. For something to become uncanny, or unhomely, it would need to be first known as something in the mind before it is introduced to us again under a different, maybe even odd, circumstance. It would be something known to us but presented in a different light in turn then making us uncomfortable. This may be the reason cursed images are so unsettling to some

³⁰ Freud, S., 1919. *The "Uncanny"*.

³¹ Freud, S., 1919. *The "Uncanny"*.

viewers, as they are often of objects or settings, which we can be very familiar with, yet the moments are captured in such a manner that they turn what we know into something different.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the cursed image through many different psychological theories. It has looked into how our animal instincts play a big role in our day-to-day lives still, even though in many ways we have evolved so far away from our mammalian roots. It has also analyzed the selected cursed images under an attentive microscope, took them apart and investigated how all of the pieces come together and how we respond to all the segments.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to examine the online phenomenon of the cursed image. It was done so through art history as well as the psychological responses we have to them as mammals. Chapter one taught me the history and roots of the online phenomenon whereas chapter two showed me all the ways the essence of the cursed image has been there since the beginning of art. Chapter three let me look at the cursed image through different theories and I learned just how much more this phenomenon is than we might initially think. At the beginning of writing this thesis, I had a hunch that the cursed image had something interesting and important to show us about humans, and I believe I proved this using different psychological theories.

In chapter one I explored the backstory of the cursed image- where it began and where it is now, and what has come of it since. I looked at the online accounts curating and creating this type of content, ranging from photographs of people striking their photoshop doppelgänger with a brick to pictures of glowing in the dark thrones in nightclubs.

Chapter two looked at the essence of the cursed image in art history. The idea of a cursed image is to shock and/or confuse the viewer- just like shock art. I take a gander at artists such as Hans Bellmer, Diane Arbus, Cindy Sherman and Max Slobodda and how their professional practice has had elements of shock to it. The aim of this chapter was to analyze their work and see the links- between their practices and the cursed image.

In chapter three I looked at theories such as the car crash theory, fight-or-flight theory, desensitization therapy, uncanny valley phenomenon and the uncanny theory, analyzed cursed images through those lenses and delved into how we respond to things such as horror as animals. I then took into account some of my interviewee's thoughts on the matter and added their viewpoints into our discussion. The very limited amount of data collected during the course of the making of this thesis was one of my limitations and I would encourage this research to be continued and expanded in the future endeavors of this field.

One can look at the novelty of the originality of this thesis approach as it is not a well-researched path- especially not the connection made between cursed images and how we psychologically respond to them, other can see how an understudied subject can be difficult to research. My hopes for this subject in the future are that people will study this field more intently and seriously than before, as I believe this is an important, but also interesting phenomenon that is not only connected to art but also being human.

We should always wonder why do we want to keep looking as it speaks volumes about how much we are part of the animal kingdom. Humans often like to pretend we have evolved past such nonsense as we've invented the internet, airplanes, neuroscience and religion but I believe our animal instincts tend to steer us around the world every day more than we believe. I think our animal brain will forever be one, and everything we interact with will always be met with our homosapien-hunch response. It is important to remember this as we move forward as society.

Appendices

How to make a cursed image:

-choose your setting

The setting of a cursed image may be the most important part of the process. The simplest way to achieve the “curse” would be to take your photograph in the dark with the use of flash. The flash can pick up small details which we cannot see in good light, i.e.: eye redness, certain textures, reflections. Also, the use of darkness can always make it feel as though we (the viewer) just walked into a space we aren't supposed to be in. What kind of things do we do in the dark alone?

-choose your subject matter

As discussed above, juxtaposition is a very good way of making a cursed image. You may put food in non-food spaces, characters in certain attire in an opposite setting or perhaps an animal in a non-animal space. Unusual masks, bright or strange props and unusual costumes are a couple of things worth trying out. Be creative!

-create the correct mood

How else are you to achieve a certain mood in a photograph if you aren't striving for it? Of course many cursed images are made on accident, yet when they are intended you can only imagine the chaos that preceded the taking of such photograph.

Alan Kinsella interview:

Q: Do you know what the cursed image is?

A: " It is an uncommon style of image used for kinda shock- what's the word- shock value. I think a lot of them are grainy which can add to the confusion of the image, if that's what the image is about- confusion or displacement."

Q: What do you feel looking at a cursed image?

A: "em..... a sense of confusion about the image. I suppose I want to know what's going on as well, also usually I would laugh at one, because I think things in uncommon places are funny. I also think it fits into modern art in the sense that modern art is supposed to invoke emotion in people or create a response in people. My view on modern art is that it's supposed to create an emotional response from the viewer. And I think the cursed image can do that quite well, especially if the feelings are of disgust or terror."

Q: You say disgust, or terror, can you tell me why you want to keep looking at them if those are the feelings?

A: "i suppose it's very rare to have an emotional response to an image when we see so many on a regular basis on a platform such as Instagram. I think a lot of the time

people our age can feel –what’s the fucking word- desensitized and disconnected. and I think looking at cursed images brings a lightheartedness and um a comedic value to photography.

I think humans are drawn to things that upset us, we have a great sense of curiosity which I think is why the likes of true crime documentaries and murder mysteries are so popular in mainstream media.”

Amy Byrne Interview:

Q: Do you know what the cursed image is?

A: “nope.”

Q: Here are some examples of the cursed image, what do you think about them?

A: “they make me uncomfortable and make me think of nightmares”

Q: Why do you think they are so popular?

A: “emm..... I think certain people like uncomfortable things. I think it’s the shock factor and then they are shared around”

Q: Why is the shock factor important?

A: “i just feel like in general there's an audience that it appeals to, especially in the art world. I don't like the ones that play on mental health issues, especially suicide, I feel like they could be triggering for some viewers. “

Michael Burton Interview:

Q: Do you know what the cursed image is?

A: “i don't believe so”

Q: Here are some examples, what do these images make you feel?

A: “i don't understand why em in this case something which usually brings joy has to be changed so I look at it and say what the fuck. Like the micky mouse and the dog, originally when I seen that I thought it was a melted version from Chernobyl or something. Obviously when I look at it more, I start to realize what it is but when you expect a good thing and see it ruined, it's a bit annoying. Em. I don't see the point in trying to ruin something which is already in our brains as fun, maybe from our childhood which is why I was a little startled.”

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