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Research article

Whispers of a Fibre Optic Cable – Technogenic Echoes as Eerie Technofutures in Wilke Weermann’s *Unheim*

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Abstract

In his play *Unheim*, Wilke Weermann envisions a dystopian future shaped by imaginative forms of interplay between humans and smart technologies: smart homes are inhabited by ghosts in the form of previous residents that have imprinted themselves into the home’s technologies by interacting with it. The home continues to produce technological acts as if the human would still be living in it, shaping itself around an absent person – and by that creating the un-home-ly notion of a ghost, as an echo of the previously human inhabitant. The phenomenon of echo appears in *Unheim* both traditionally as the repetition of voice as well as in the form of non-vocal acts within communicative context being replicated. In this article we aim to analyse the world presented in *Unheim* in regard to its contribution towards a process of meaning creation in considering certain human-technology-relations that can be opened up to hermeneutical analysis. By employing a grammatical approach towards technology, the latter can be understood as technology games (in reference to Wittgenstein’s language games) and a way we do things. It is found that in *Unheim*, conveyed through the notion of echo, smart home technologies perform moves that constitute a shift from a way we do things to a way *things* do things that is abstracted from human activity. This way things do things that is inscribed into the smart home establishes things as being autonomous in a specific way that is indifferent to humanity and therefore calls into question accountability by humans for technological developments.

Keywords: Unheimlich; Echo; Eerie; Hermeneutical Technology Assessment; Autonomous Technology; Uncanny; Dwelling

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² A firm commitment to the importance of academic discussion and an exchange of ideas sometimes collides with the need not to be misunderstood in contentious times. This is the case for one of the authors of this paper who therefore prefers to remain anonymous



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Научная статья

Шепот оптоволоконного кабеля – Техногенные отголоски жуткого технобудущего в пьесе Вильке Веерманна “Унхайм”

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Аннотация

В своей пьесе “Унхайм” Вильке Веерман представляет антиутопическое будущее, сформированное воображаемыми формами взаимодействия человека и умных технологий: умные дома населены призраками в виде бывших жильцов, которые оставили свой след в технологиях дома, взаимодействуя с ним. Дом продолжает производить технологические действия, как если бы в нем все еще жил человек, формируясь вокруг отсутствующего человека – и тем самым создавая неуютное представление о призраке как об отголоске прежнего обитателя-человека. Феномен эха в “Унхайме” проявляется как традиционно в виде повторения голоса, так и в форме невербальных актов в коммуникативном контексте, которые воспроизводятся. В этой статье мы стремимся проанализировать мир, представленный в “Унхайме”, с точки зрения его вклада в процесс создания смысла при рассмотрении определенных взаимоотношений человека и технологий, которые могут быть подвергнуты герменевтическому анализу. Используя грамматический подход к технологиям, последние можно понимать как технологические игры (в отсылке к языковым играм Витгенштейна) и способ, которым мы делаем вещи. Обнаружено, что в “Унхайме”, передаваемом через понятие эха, технологии “умного дома” совершают действия, которые представляют собой переход от способа, которым мы делаем вещи, к способу, которым вещи делают вещи, абстрагированному от человеческой деятельности. Этот способ, которым вещи делают вещи, заложенный в “умном доме”, устанавливает вещи как автономные особым образом, безразличным к человечеству, и, следовательно, ставит под сомнение ответственность человека за технологические разработки.

Ключевые слова: Унхайм; Эхо; Жуткое; Герменевтическая оценка технологий; Автономные технологии; Зловещее; Жилище

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² Твердая приверженность важности научных дискуссий и обмена идеями иногда вступает в противоречие с необходимостью не дать понять себя неправильно в сложные времена. Именно так обстоит дело с одним из авторов этой статьи, который предпочитает оставаться анонимным



“Das smarte Heim der Zukunft, Blinzelt im Sleep Mode Mit seinen roten Augen. Schnarchende Lüfter Tragen die Kälte herein Und bedecken die Prozessoren damit. Knisternd wendet die Taktfrequenz sich auf die Seite. Nur selten geht ein Rollen durch die Datenträger. Das rote Lämpchen aber schweigt Von den Träumen des Geräts.”	“The smart home of the future, Blinks in sleep mode With its red eyes. Snoring fans bring in the cold And cover the processors with it. The clock frequency crackles as it turns on its side. Only seldomly does a scroll pass through the data carriers. But the red light remains silent About the dreams of the device.”
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(Weermann, 2022, pp. 5–6)³

– a voice introduces the smart home ARCADIA in Wilke Weermann’s play *Unheim* (“Un-Home”, a play on words referencing the Freudian “*unheimlich*,” often translated as “uncanny,” “unhomely,” or “eerie“). The play that was written and directed by Weermann premiered in October 2022 at the Schauspiel Frankfurt and received critical acclaim, including the Kurt Hübner Directing Award (Schauspiel Frankfurt n.d.). In this paper, we discuss the play as an instance of art doing philosophy, as Weermann’s work contributes to an understanding of our technological world. *Unheim* is particularly interesting as it explores smart technologies – especially that of the smart home – through the lens of the *unheimlich* which provides compelling insights into the ways humans and technology relate to and interact with each other. While also having seen the play at Schauspiel Frankfurt, we work from the (unpublished) script in order to properly engage with the content of the play. In a sense, we do not contemplate the play itself as an artifact, but rather enter the play in a field study of sorts and engage with the artifacts as they are presented to us on the plot level.

The anthropomorphic character of the home as it is portrayed in the beginning already marks a central theme in *Unheim*: Technological systems, most importantly smart homes, are conceptualised as actors in the various interplays of human-machine-interaction. These actions create phenomena which by humans are perceived as “paranormal” and “unhomely”, which is what brings the protagonist, the ghost hunter or “investigator of abnormal affairs” Ira, onto the scene (Weermann, 2022, p. 4). Voices are one of the primary means of how the uncanny presents itself in *Unheim*, the “whispers of fibre optic cables” being a formative childhood memory for Ira (p. 6).

³ All translations from Weermann (2022) are by the authors.



AN EERIE ECHO

In the play, we follow Ira, whose first investigation concerns a woman who feels like her deceased wife is still present in the room next to her. After a short examination of the matters at hand, Ira explains to the woman that the house acts as if her wife was still there; that “we inscribe ourselves into the space we inhabit” and hence the smart home forms around ourselves, our actions, and adapts to our routines (Weermann, 2022, p. 8). After an inhabitant dies, the smart home continues to act according to the previously learned inscriptions as if the human was still there – and in doing so creates a ghost, an echo of its former inhabitant. This “failure of absence” elicits a notion of eeriness as Mark Fisher (2016, p. 62) describes it; the actions carried out by the home evoke speculation about their cause due to their seeming intentionality: Is the deceased wife still present? If so, how and in what way? Is she, perhaps, a ghost? Is this a *paranormal* event? The last question is the one being asked by the woman in the play, leading Ira to explain that the event itself is *abnormal* (“anormal”, Weermann, 2022, p. 7), *paranormal* being the interpretation of said event. She then continues to explain how the house is the cause of the feeling of the deceased wife still being present as it keeps lighting cigarettes like it used to when the wife was still smoking them. Fisher (2016, p. 62) notes:

The eerie concerns the unknown; when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears.

In the scene, Ira’s explanation of how the presence of the ghostly entity came to be is not sufficient to the woman, who is still afraid of formatting the house due to the possibility of wiping the soul of her late wife in the process which might be stored on its hard drive. She then decides to say goodbye to her without the investigator present (Weermann, 2022, p. 9). Knowledge of the phenomenon’s cause is not fully acquired and therefore a feeling of eeriness remains.

The ghost in this scene is an echo in an Ovidian sense: In “Narcissus and Echo”, Ovid (ca. 8 C.E./2004, III 339-510) introduces the character of Echo, a nymph who is cursed to lose her ability to speak, only being able to repeat the words of others. After being rejected by the self-obsessed Narcissus, Echo’s body withers away, only leaving her voice living on in the mountains, continuing to repeat other’s utterances. While the reader holds full knowledge about the utterance’s origins, this is not the case within the tale on the plot level: Echo, just as the acoustic phenomenon, is an eerie entity⁵. Similar to Ovid’s Echo, the echo in *Unheim* repeats actions another person has previously performed. As these actions cannot be linked back to an embodied acting subject, a feeling of eeriness arises. This is also the case for the whispering fibre optic cables, which

⁵ Other philosophers have interpreted the tale of Narcissus and Echo differently – or rather, have stressed other aspects of it –, most notably Derrida, who parallels the relation between the two characters with the one between author and reader: the author being blind in uttering words and the reader filling them with meaning. In this process, Echo appropriates Narcissus’ words, making them her own (Dick & Kofman, 2002). This further raises questions concerning agency and intentionality, and hence the eerie: Is there intent behind Echo’s words that goes beyond just repeating Narcissus’ words?



Ira – unsatisfactorily – explains to be “simply data. Yearnings of some other people” (Weermann, 2022, p. 7).

It seems to not be sufficient to know of the material origins of the phenomenon to dissipate its eeriness. This might be due to its nature being not only a matter of information, but also an experience of atmospheric quality: Since the material mechanisms cannot be directly experienced, sensory impressions are still interpreted as manifestations of the “ghost” or an immaterial soul of the deceased, often independently from abstract knowledge.

With the play’s title being a direct reference to the German *unheimlich*, eeriness is how the uncanny shows up in the scene in *Unheim*. The tale provides insight about another element of the uncanny present here: that of familiarity or repetition. Freud identifies this as something “well known, familiar” showing up in a different, now distorted form, creating doubles and confusions, which poses fundamental doubts and questions about the identity of a person, or, at times, the self (Freud, 1919, p. 309). As an echo being a repetition of something familiar, *Unheim* creates countless opportunities for such confusions – either in the form of the aforementioned “ghosts” or later on, when the apartment complex “Arcadia” is introduced (Weermann 2022, p. 14). These apartments can be inscribed by several residents at once, simultaneously creating an individual configuration for every resident. Slowly, the boundaries between the residents begin to blur, leading to artifacts that call into question previously clear notions about the identities and locations of the characters. With the uncanny also characterized by Schelling (1857, p. 649) as something that should have stayed hidden in secrecy or latency but has shown itself, these phenomena hint at an underlying mechanism that the corporation behind the apartment complex did not intend to be shown. By becoming, in a way, autonomous and interacting with its residents as an eerie entity, the smart home uncovers its true nature that is shaped only superficially by a strive for comfort for its residents; neither does it seem to only follow the purpose designated by the corporation, which is to generate profit; it becomes its own entity with a completely different, unclear agency, which culminates in the complete disappearance of humans.

This is in line with another element of the uncanny differentiated by Freud and Jentsch, which is fundamental doubt about the “aliveness” of an object – something that shows up ubiquitously in an automated world, where the intended purpose of technologies seems to deviate from its actual use or behavior (Gransche, 2020, p. 41). Wherever this happens, we tend to instinctively assume some form of independent agency, which, by virtue of not being natural, appears uncanny.

CONSTRUCTING A TECHNOFUTURE

Literary and dramatic works such as *Unheim* are part of processes of meaning creation: They conceptualise technofutures, consisting of both the technologies themselves as well as how they are used and how they shape society – and thus offer ways to interpret, understand and assess current, emerging or imaginative technological developments. These works, or rather the visions expressed by them, are therefore object of technology assessment, more precisely: hermeneutical TA (Wei-Kang Liu, 2023).



Weermann envisions a world for us to enter; a world to read, understand and interpret; a world in which interplay between humans and technology is performed differently. Although imaginative, the future described in *Unheim* is not a discontinuous one such as those posited by trans- and posthumanists. Rather, it “serve[s] the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (Jameson, 2007, p. 288). Central to this vision is the technical work that is the smart home: As we enter the play – be it in written form or performed on stage – we also enter the smart home itself as a technical world that is to be explored, that “draws together material things as well as human developers and users” and hence can be considered a world in the sense of “composition or putting together of numerous elements or parts” (Nordmann, 2023, p. 194). A hermeneutical technology assessment of such worlds, then, investigates “what they signify about the ways in which humans and things can live and work together” (p. 194).

Understood this way, *Unheim*’s smart home is neither a prediction of how our future might be nor a mere fiction – instead, it tells us “about the hopes and fears, practices and discourses of today” (Grunwald/Nordmann, 2023, p. 38). It offers an interpretation of the technology and in doing that attaches meaning to it, which is part of a hermeneutic circle in which different actors – such as artists and playwrights, but also technicians and TA-practitioners, politicians and civilians – co-construct the societal meaning of a certain technology. The question, then, arises as to what meaning this construction of a future holds for the present.

The smart home in *Unheim* is a continuation of Ray Bradbury’s *There Will Come Soft Rains*⁶, a short story that describes a now empty automated house whose inhabitants were killed in a nuclear explosion. The house now continues to cook, clean and read poems as if the deceased residents were still alive (Bradbury, 1950). A comparison of *Unheim* with the short story by Bradbury, originally published in 1950, emphasises how constructions of the future are not future presents, but present futures that have their time of construction inscribed into them. The now past future of *There Will Come Soft Rains* is dominated by the then imminent threat of nuclear war (which might have become more relevant again recently). The automated house here is parallelised with nature by inclusion of Sara Teasdale’s identically-titled poem as the stories’ centerpiece which describes flora and fauna coming back after a war that had annihilated humankind:

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.
Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly

(Teasdale, 1918, as quoted in Bradbury, 1950, p. 170)

We propose to understand Bradbury’s automated house mainly as a narrative device: it signifies that the story is set in a science-fiction future where such technologies exist. It surely can also be object to a hermeneutical analysis, but it is not the central

⁶ Interestingly, *Soft Rains Will Come* is set in the year 2026, the year this paper is written.



technology that is causal to the dystopian world of Bradbury – instead, this is the atom bomb. The automated home, which continues to act as if its residents were still there, shows the abruptness of how a nuclear strike could end humanity: It does not mind “if mankind perished utterly”, it is merely part of the petrichor that heralds the soft rains to come. The automated house tells us about fears concerning the extermination of humankind which comes without any warning whatsoever and which is materialised in the atom bomb and mediated through the automated house.

In *Unheim*, on the other hand, the smart home itself is the source of the eerie: While Bradbury’s automated house told readers about fears of a nuclear apocalypse, Weermann’s smart home tells us about a present where the imminent threat of nuclear war has waned and automation and smart technology is present in our lives, materially as well as in narrative forms of the future. Bradbury’s house tells us about disquieting technology, Weermann’s house *is* the disquieting technology.

UNEARTHING THE UNHOME

Technofutures as described deal with meaning of technologies. We propose to approach ‘meaning’ in a (late-)Wittgensteinian use-oriented way:

the meaning of a word is its use in language

(Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, §43, p. 25e)

This use, according to Wittgenstein, is structured by language games whose rules both limit and make possible – in the Kantian sense of being a transcendental condition of possibility – the particular use in a given context: a use of a language-sign is only meaningful insofar as it plays a role in a language game (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, §41, p. 24e). Wittgenstein stresses that speaking a language, partaking in a language game is part of a “form of life” (§23, 15e), a way to do things which encompasses multiple language games and is interwoven with human activity.

Following this concept of meaning and translating it to technology⁷, the meaning of a technological object, thus, would be its rules of use in “*technology games*” (Coeckelbergh, 2018): The meaning of a hammer, for example is tied to human activity of hammering, games of building and repairing and a form of life: “an entire socio-technological environment in which use of roofs, gardens, and houses are part of the *way we do things*” (p. 1512). Knowing the meaning of a thing, then, is knowing how to operate with it, how to employ it in certain technology games. Now consider technologies that are objects of (hermeneutical) TA, that is, technologies related to the future, existing in

⁷ This approach is not novel and can be attributed to Mark Coeckelbergh who proposed the concept of technology games (Coeckelbergh, 2018; Coeckelbergh & Funk, 2018) and Alfred Nordmann whose inquiry focusses on the early Wittgenstein (Nordmann, 2018; 2020). For a discussion of the two theories see Pezzica, 2023. It is to be noted that while in a previous paper Leon Pezzica has contrasted the two positions (“syntactical Technogrammar” referring to Nordmann’s work versus “deep Technogrammar” referring to Coeckelbergh’s), upon further examination we would like to reconcile both conceptualisations, stressing their complementary character.



the form of prototypes or imaginaries: the question that is to be asked in regards to the meaning of those technologies are:

What are the conditions of possibility – consisting in technology games and a form of life – that make possible a use of said technologies?

Alfred Nordmann, in reference to Jameson, compares this type of TA with the work of an archeologist:

Prototypes have a precarious ontological status. Just like isolated things from the past that were found here or there, they are here, right in front of us, but they testify to a way of living that is quite alien to us, unfamiliar. (Nordmann as quoted in Borrmann et al., 2023, p. 58)

Just as the archeologist tries to construct a past that provides a structure for unearthed artifacts to be used, we in the role of a TA-practitioner construct a future that provides a structure for prototypes and imaginary artifacts to be used – the future is, in this sense, “unearthed” as well (Nordmann in Borrmann et al., 2023, p. 58). Now, what are the artifacts unearthed from the soil that is Weermann’s *Unheim* and what games, what form of life, what way to do things makes possible the employment of those artifacts into human activity?

The smart home that has been object of this analysis so far is explicitly part of various technology games: games of smoking and of cleaning, of cooking and food shopping (Weermann, 2022, p. 8). The home itself is an actor in those games, not only in the sense of the artifact being “co-responsible” in the poietic “bringing forth” of it as Heidegger (1954, pp. 7–8) puts it, but in the sense of performing acts within a technology game that are decidedly ascribed only to human actors. Bruno Latour attributes such an actor-status even to more rudimentary artifacts such as a “groom” (a door closer):

The groom is indeed anthropomorphic, in three senses: first, it has been made by humans; second, it substitutes for the actions of people and is a delegate that permanently occupies the position of a human; and third, it shapes human action by prescribing back what sort of people should pass through the door. (Latour, 1992, p. 160)

But if, following Latour, even simple technologies such as a door closer are to be considered “permanently occupying the position of a human”, making moves within a technology game that are usually reserved for human actors, what is the peculiarity – if there is any – of the acts produced by Weermann’s smart home? How is the smart home any different – or in any other quality anthropomorphic – from the groom? This is elucidated by the previously explored notion of eeriness: The groom’s acts can be attributed to an entity whose operating principles are known to humans playing the going-through-the-door technology game. Due to the embeddedness within the game, the groom’s acts are meaningful and its intentions evident to humans playing the game; it is, therefore, particularly not eerie (although it might be to humans who are not familiar with how a groom functions). Furthermore, the groom’s mechanism can be experienced in a more direct or material way: we can see the mechanical arm that closes the door and we



see the groom closing the door as a result of a human actor opening it. There is, therefore, no uncanny atmosphere being emitted by the groom.

While, coming from an ANT perspective, the groom could be argued to be just as autonomous as any other nonhuman actor, the perceived autonomy is evidently of a different quality from the one being exerted by the smart home in *Unheim*: The groom makes a meaningful move within a technology game, the going-through-the-door game, which is part of the way we do things; its *nomos*, understood as the rules governing the role it plays within the technology game, is decidedly not self-inscribed, but co-constructed by human-machine-interaction. The smart home's actions, on the other hand, are not meaningful to the human actors it interacts with, they are, in this sense, *ungrammatical*; the smart home seems in a way 'untethered' from the rules governing how we interact with things. Within the “imaginary working order of people and things” (Nordmann, 2023, p. 211) posited by the smart home the people seem to take a back seat, the “way we do things” becomes a “way things do things”. The conditions of possibility that give meaning to the technological acts of the smart home consist of a form of life within which technology acts independently from humans. Just like in the play, *technology becomes its own entity with a completely different, unclear agency, which (metaphorically) culminates in the complete disappearance of humans*.

This technofuture differs from the dystopian visions expressed by popular works of science fiction: *The Matrix*' Machines or *The Terminator*'s Skynet, though certainly autonomous in a comparable way, are not eerie: There is no “failure of presence” or “failure of absence”, no speculation concerning “a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience” (Fisher, 2016, p. 62). The Machines and Skynet are hostile and pose a threat to humanity, but their actions form an openly exploitative relationship with human actors instead of appearing as a ghostly echo that is abstracted from actual human life. Gransche identifies this kind of open hostility as the antithesis to the uncanny, the point at which the veil is “lifted completely” (Gransche, 2020, p. 42).

The abstraction, however, constitutes a shift away from a way we do things to a way things do things, namely in a mode that is alien, incomprehensible and eerie to us, that produces an unhomely atmosphere and hints at underlying mechanisms that should have stayed hidden. These mechanisms can be captured by what Marek Poliks and Roberto Alonso Trillo call “lift”: the tendency of capital to abstract itself “from the soil, from physical capital and human labour” – it is “the machinic impulse toward abstraction” (Poliks & Trillo, 2025, p. 60).

This “machinic impulse” is inscribed into the smart home, it is part of a working order of things where the human becomes irrelevant in its role as an actor and technology is “lifted” from human activity. Poliks and Trillo push this vision even further by coining the term “exocapitalism”, which they define as “a self-replicating machine of unknown origin whose internal drives not only contradict but remain utterly ambivalent to the interest of its former dependencies (sun, earth, oil, human). The human's relationship to capitalism moves from generative to irrelevant” (Poliks & Trillo, 2025, p. 87). Although



“exocapitalism” as a comprehensive theory of capitalism is lacking⁸, Poliks and Trillo describe a *vision* of a technocapitalism that is indifferent to the human, that is some kind of otherworldly eerie entity who – though currently – does not necessarily use humanity as a substrate. Exocapitalism falls short in its ontological description of capital, but posits a working order of things which exists in the form of a vision, of a narrative that is part of the discourse on the relations (present and future) between humans and technology.

The exocapitalist vision – or, equivalently: the *exotechnological* vision – is precisely the form of life the smart home in *Unheim* hints at: Technology is *exo-* to the human, neither is it brought forth by humans nor defined via its interactions with human actors. The house neither “plays theatre with you” nor “for you” (Weermann 2022, p. 8), it just produces acts entirely abstract from human activity. Claire Cical explicates the meaning this notion of capital-generating technology being external to human endeavor has for society:

What Exocapitalism expresses, in cosmological and computational form, is therefore humanity’s mimetic desire to escape itself, to rid itself of the unbearable responsibility implied by mediation. By presenting capital as an autonomous, indifferent, and external organism, the theory offers a form of symbolic absolution: if the system is *exo*, then responsibility evaporates in complexity. (Cical 2026, p. 6)

This lack of responsibility is materialised in Weermann’s smart home. Through its eerie autonomy it uncovers a future in which things act indifferent towards humanity – and humanity, in turn, lives alongside increasingly abstracted technology, indifferent to our own responsibility – despite the fact that “we inscribe ourselves into the space we inhabit” (Weermann, 2022, p. 8) and it therefore still carries our imprint.

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⁸ For a short discussion see Cical, 2025.



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