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The Uncanniness of the Ordinary: Rethinking the Uncanny within Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. Through the many reinterpretations of Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919) within French Postmodernism, in recent decades the uncanny has become a vague synonym for the methodology of deconstruction instead of being characterized as an aesthetic category. The essay aims to disambiguate the uncanny by reestablishing its characterizing nucleus and relocating it within the aesthetics. To do so, it turns to Juliane Rebentisch's notion of "uncanniness of the ordinary", which translates a term coined by Stanley Cavell into aesthetics. According to Rebentisch, this emotional state is called up by the encounter with artworks which, through minimal dislocations and distortions, deprive objects of daily use of their familiarity, forcing us to look more closely at their material, sensorial and phenomenological dimensions. Challenging habitual patterns of sensory perception, this aesthetic experience evokes a disturbing, uncanny feeling. Rebentisch draws on Freud's definition of the uncanny as an emotional state due to the appearance of something familiar in an unfamiliar light and thus offers a path to reconstitute a more stable conceptual framework. At the same time, Rebentisch proposes a novelty by interpreting the uncanny not only as frightening and disturbing, but as a feeling that encourages implementing alternative modes of perception to rediscover what has been taken for granted.

1. Introduction

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.)
(Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 500)

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In the last twenty years, the uncanny has become «one of the most supercharged words in our current critical vocabulary» (Jay, 1998, p. 157), with the effect of losing its characterizing nucleus and turning into «an insidious, all-pervasive, “passe-partout” word to address virtually any topic» (Masschelein, 2011, p. 2). Following this evolution, the notion has been put to work in a myriad of disciplines: from architecture (Vidler, 1999) to film studies (Spadoni, 2007), from visual arts (Kelley, 2004) to cultural studies (Collins and Jervis, 2008), from literature studies (Slethaug, 1993) to queer (Palmer, 2012) and postcolonial (Bhabha, 1992) theory.

This expansion of the uncanny well beyond the boundaries of aesthetics has led to a loss of its conceptual core. Therefore, the present article aims to redefine the uncanny as an aesthetic category, i.e., the description and evaluation of a feeling called up by a specific sensorial experience with artistic or aesthetic objects. To do so, the first step is to disambiguate the concept by tracing its genealogy, focusing on Freud’s seminal text *Das Unheimliche* and some of its numerous – sometimes controversial or even betraying – reinterpretations within French Postmodernism. This operation is not intended to be a historical reconstruction of all the transformations of this prolific yet elusive category but a mapping of the processes of its conceptualization. The aim consists of understanding the reasons beneath the evolution of the uncanny and identifying the main features that can still be useful for the present aesthetic discourse. The second part of the essay will focus on Juliane Rebentisch’s attempt to actualize the concept through the notion of “uncanniness of the ordinary” yet remaining faithful to its classical nucleus.

2. Genealogy of the uncanny: from an aesthetic phenomenon to an abstract critical tool

The first philosophical references to the uncanny can be found already in Schelling, Nietzsche, and, above all, Heidegger. However, the seminal text which originates the discourse about the uncanny is Freud’s essay *Das Unheimliche* from 1919. Freud seeks to delve into the specific qualities of the uncanny, which, according to him, until now was neglected by the aesthetics, too concentrated on positive feelings such as the beautiful and the attractive. The first necessary step is distinguishing it from the eerie and the horrifying. In fact, even if the uncanny «is

undoubtedly related to what is frightening» (Freud, 1974, p. 219), it also has its own conceptual core that the research has hitherto failed to identify.

The lack of a sufficiently precise framing of the feeling is also the reason for Freud's dissatisfaction with Jentsch's analysis of the uncanny, the first psychoanalytical work devoted to this subject. Describing it as an affection due to «intellectual uncertainty» – for example about whether something is animate or inanimate – Jentsch «did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar» (Freud, 1974, p. 221). It is essential to keep in mind the critique against Jentsch because, as we will see, most of the postmodern and contemporary interpretations of the uncanny insist on linking the feeling with an intellectual doubt, a cognitive insecurity creating a sense of ambiguity. However, Freud notices that intellectual uncertainty, even if bounded with it, neither constitutes the peculiarity of the uncanny nor is a sufficient condition for its manifestation.

To pin down the distinctive aspects of the feeling, Freud undertakes a detailed linguistic analysis, remarking on the impossibility of translating the German *unheimlich* into other languages. *Unheimlich* is, in fact, the antonym of *heimlich*, which is not univocal, but «belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different» (Freud, 1974, p. 224). Its first and most obvious connotation relates to the root of the word from *Heim* (home). *Heimlich* indicates something familiar, comfortable, intimate, and hence also agreeable and friendly. At the same time, the word *heimlich* also means concealed, clandestine, and kept hidden.

Unheimlich should therefore negate both the meanings of *heimlich*: the familiarity as well as the concealment. However, as observed by Anneleen Masschelein, the “un-” in the word *unheimlich* does not work as a classical linguistic negation, but it is «the token of repression» (Freud, 1974, p. 245). The repression does not know negation in the usual sense since it does not respond to the law of noncontradiction. Even when something is repressed, it remains buried but still pulsing in the unconscious, therefore «it is perfectly possible that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time» (Masschelein, 2011, p. 8). Freud's most concise and effective definition explains the uncanny as «something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression» (Freud, 1974, p. 241).

The second part of the essay constitutes a collection of experiences from fictional works

and real life commonly described with the word *unheimlich*. A long section is dedicated to the close reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story *The Sandman*, whose uncanniness lies in the protagonist's fear of losing the eyes, explained by Freud as repressed castration anxiety. Then Freud turns to the difference between the feeling of the uncanny aroused by works of fiction and its occurrences in reality. The last ones are due to the return of repressed and forgotten infantile material, such as the castration fear, or to the revival of surmounted primitive modes of thinking of the human species, including animism, magic, and the omnipotence of thoughts. For example, Freud claims that «all supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits» (Freud, 1974, p. 242). For this reason, when someone sees a ghost-like apparition, this results not only frightening or weird but uncanny. The feeling does not lie in the intellectual uncertainty whether the ghost is real or not (as in Jentsch's explanatory model) nor in the sensory properties of what we're looking at. Rather, the affective state is caused by a psychological reaction: the ghost-like presence evokes allegedly surmounted, but in truth just repressed, beliefs in the afterlife.

Nevertheless, hidden elements in the folds of Freud's essay allow us to read the uncanny as a feeling due to a sensorial experience. First of all, Freud highlights the peculiar connection of the uncanny with the fear of losing the eyes, or more generally to the idea of something that should have remained kept out of sight and become visible. However, he encloses this intuition within his psychosexual framework, explaining the loss of the eyes as a symbol for castration anxiety rather than linking it with questions about gaze and visibility. Secondly, Freud does not seem concerned with the reasons behind the shift in the meaning of the word *heimlich* from familiarity to concealment, but this is an important passage that needs clarification. It is possible to formulate the hypothesis that intimacy, by becoming extreme closeness, turns into impenetrability and concealment. What is close and constantly before our eyes blurs its shape until it loses its contours and becomes extraneous to us. Following this line of interpretation, it is possible to conclude that the *un-heimlich* negates both the spheres of what is familiar and what is hidden because it is a feeling called up when something arises from the opacity to which our extreme familiarity had confined it and imposes itself in the space of vision. Freud himself quotes in his essay two times Schelling's famous definition of the uncanny «as something which ought to have remained hidden but had come to light» (Freud 1974, p. 241), a description that evokes the idea of the uncanny as a shocking sensorial

revelation of something that should have been restrained to the shadows.

Both Jacques Lacan and Georges Didi-Hubermann propose a similar line of thinking in their rereading of *Das Unheimliche*. In *Seminar X*, Lacan turns to Freud's text considering it «indispensable for broaching the question of anxiety» (Lacan, 2014, p. 41). The uncanny takes over when the materiality of existence irreducible to a univocal system of signification – what Lacan calls “the Real” – undercuts habitual perceptual schemata which try to secure the experience into a stable symbolic structure. The feeling is thus due to the emergence of something hidden within the space of vision; something that «was already there, at much closer quarters, at home, *Heim*» (Lacan, 2014, p. 75), repressed inside a familiar and well-organized landscape of the visible. The loss of the eyes, central in E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story, epitomizes this fear: being robbed of one's own eyes means losing control over the space of vision, losing the privileged position of ordering things into a rigid symbolic structure through a central perspective.

Returning to this topic in *Seminar XI* (1998), Lacan illustrates the occurrence of the uncanny through the analysis of another artwork: Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. The painting shows two high dignitaries surrounded by items that symbolize their mastery of the arts of the *quadrivium* (astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music), indicating their power and culture. Nonetheless, the attention is attracted by a seemingly shapeless spot fluctuating in the middle of the composition. The disciplined space of vision is distorted and defamiliarized by an uncanny presence that almost imperceptibly disturbs its smooth and coherent surface, forcing an uncomfortable change of perspective. It is a skull, realized thanks to the technic of the *anamorphosis* and recognizable only by looking at the painting from one side. A slight alteration of the well-known picture that, by challenging familiar modes of perceiving and thus interpreting reality, reveals the ephemeral nature of the ambassadors' power.

With a similar move, the French philosopher and art historian Didi-Huberman turns to the uncanny to describe «the threatening character of the visual experience» (Didi-Huberman 1992, p. 181, my translation). According to him, the visual experience exceeds the mere perception of what is visible, of what is given for the eyes to see. What we are trying to capture by looking at it eludes us, exposing the viewer to the feeling of losing control over the space of vision (the loss of the eyes in *The Sandman*). We usually try to erase this disturbing character by thinking of perception as a process of decoding visual marks, but the uncanny reminds us

of this obscure, indecipherable residuum within the visual space. Therefore, the uncanny «manifests well the power of the regarded on the one who is regarding» (Didi-Huberman, 1992, p. 179), the possibility that something lies open to view still remaining impenetrable and concealed. In this way, both Lacan and Didi-Huberman reconduct the uncanny to something repressed within visual experience, whose emergence shakes up a familiar sensorial and symbolic order.

Lacan and later Didi-Huberman were not the only ones to undertake a rereading of Freud's essay, which, after being overlooked for decades, was rediscovered in the mid-1960s. Thanks to its intrinsic ambiguity and vagueness, the uncanny affirmed itself as «a veritable goldmine for deconstructionists and post-structuralists» (Griffero, 2021, p. 106). Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, Freud's essay experienced an intense phase of new conceptualization, sometimes even intentional distortion. The following analysis does not seek to survey all the authors involved in creating the «postmodern uncanny» (Vidler, 1999, p. 8), but to detect the main trajectories that brought the concept to the present, uncontrolled expansion. The visual and perceptual interpretation previously outlined remained minor, while two other lines of thought prevailed.

The first one turns to Freud's essay in order to bring out the ambivalence between imagination and reality, fiction and truth. As Jacques Derrida observes, in the second part of *Das Unheimliche*, Freud distinguishes the uncanny feeling experienced in real life from the one aroused by artistic, mainly literary, productions. Freud admits that «fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny sensations than are possible in real life» (Freud, 1974, p. 251). Fictive texts can deceive us «by promising to give us the sober truth and then after all overstepping it» (Freud, 1974, p. 250); they confound the readers by pretending to offer them a mimetic representation of reality, and then they infiltrate fantastic elements.

Within this line of thought, the uncanny becomes paradigmatic for «the mystery of literary creation and the secret of this enviable power» (Cixous, 1976, p. 527). It expresses «the undecidable ambivalence, [...] the endless exchange between the fantastic and the real, the “symbolized” and the “symbolizer”» (Derrida, 1981, p. 268). According to this postmodern view (see also: Kofman, 1991; Weber, 1973; Hertz, 1985), the uncanny results not as a particular effect generated by some literary works but as the essence of fiction. Fiction itself is ontologically ambivalent and, therefore, intrinsically uncanny as it doubles reality, creating

another phantasmatic and elusive one; it forces the readers into a zone of liminality where a clear distinction between reality and imagination is effaced. Through this conceptual development, the uncanny progressively loses its traits as a well-defined feeling and becomes a general synonym of the ambivalence characterizing fictionality and imaginative productions. Within the postmodern tradition, it is possible to track down a second way of interpreting the uncanny in an ethical-political sense. Twenty years after *The double session*, Derrida returns to Freud's essay in *Specters of Marx*, connecting the subverting feeling of estrangement typical of the Freudian uncanny with Marxist alienation and Heideggerian homelessness. Derrida aims at developing a hauntology, as opposed to classical ontology. Hauntology is intended as a philosophy of the return of the repressed, of spectral traces recurring from the past to haunt the present. «Everything comes back to haunt everything» (Derrida, 1994, p. 183); ghostly presences from the past are everywhere, producing an uncanny feeling, insinuating themselves in the familiar landscape and disturbing not only the conceptual discourse but «both the ethics and the politics» (Derrida, 1994, p. 174). Using the uncanny as a deconstructive tool represents the most influential novelty of Derrida's second face-to-face with Freud's essay. The French philosopher suggests not to exorcise the ghosts and chase away the uncanny feeling they generate but to welcome them and greet this affective state as an opportunity to question conventional ethical and political categories by recognizing their historical, and therefore contingent, nature.

A few years before *Specters of Marx*, Julia Kristeva also conducts an ethical-political reading of *Das Unheimliche*. She claims that Freud's essay «teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves» (Kristeva, 1994, p. 191), encouraging an approach to the stranger that fights the violence of nationalism and xenophobia. According to Kristeva, the uncanny implies a deconstruction of the subject. Even if the feeling is aroused by the encounter with an object, its real cause is not a menace originating from the outside, but rather the return of something repressed in the unconscious and thus the discovery of a disturbing otherness in the heart of the subject. Recognizing otherness as a constitutive part of the subject fosters an ethics of respect and hospitality and implies a new politics of cosmopolitanism. Such a line of interpretation has later given rise to the “postcolonial uncanny” (Bhabha, 1992; Nayar, 2010; Mukherjee, 2018), arguing that the feeling illustrates the experience of estrangement from the postcolonial subject, whose “home” is inhabited by unspoken marks of the colonial violence.

The aim of this brief genealogy is not to judge the legitimacy of such different ways of rereading Freud's text, but rather to show how both the association of the uncanny with the ambiguity of fiction and its ethical-political interpretation led to its dilatation. As observed by Mark Windsor in a recent article, the consequence is that the uncanny no longer even refers to a specific feeling but it «is rather used as an abstract critical tool which can, it seems, be applied to virtually anything» (Windsor, 2019, p. 54). Windsor also notices that the uncanny is hence connected with the methodology of deconstruction, both as a feeling resulting from this process and as an affective state that prompts to question the consistency of established categories. This approach can be found in Royle's *The uncanny*, the first monograph devoted to the topic, in which he claims: «another name for uncanny overflow might be deconstruction» (Royle, 2003, p. 24). Leaving the sphere of aesthetics, the uncanny begins to indicate a general way of thinking, a strategy to create conceptual displacement and to question epistemic, semantic, or even political coherence.

2. The uncanniness of the ordinary

Once established its conceptual explosion and thus generalization, it is necessary to reconstitute a more stable and precise essence of the feeling to move back the uncanny into the realm of aesthetics. This does not imply a complete rejection of all postmodern reinterpretations as misleading but a careful delimitation of such lectures. An interesting starting point to reaffirm the uncanny within the aesthetics and rediscover its conceptual core is the notion of the uncanniness of the ordinary (*Unheimlichkeit des Gewöhnlichen*) developed by the German philosopher Juliane Rebentisch. In this second part, the article will explain the notion, firstly by framing its origins and the context in which Rebentisch uses it, then illustrating it through concrete artistic examples, and thirdly making clear within which line of interpretation Rebentisch situates her reflections.

Rebentisch takes the notion of “uncanniness of the ordinary” from Stanley Cavell and moves it from the field of philosophy of language to aesthetics. With this expression, Cavell indicates how the receptivity towards everyday language, usually employed without reflection on the single words or linguistic structures, can perturb and dislocate ordinary reality, thus generating an uncanny feeling. If grammar constitutes the implicit *apriori* basis on which

language is based, becoming aware of its mechanism implies a rapture disarranging «the so-called ordinariness or everydayness of language» (Cavell, 1988, p. 83). The more we try to understand common language by observing it closely, the more it ceases to be obvious and familiar, becoming uncanny and surreal («the surrealism of the habitual»; Cavell, 1988, p. 83). Interestingly, Cavell does not describe the emotional reaction to this process as horrific or alarming but as an astonishment that enacts new attention toward our relationship with language and reality. It is a slight yet decisive difference from the postmodern uncanny on which also Rebenitsch insists. Cavell's description seems to bring the uncanniness of the ordinary closer to the phenomenological method. As the uncanny overthrows our familiar expectations, the phenomenological approach aims to suspend the natural way of seeing the world and our pre-given understanding of it. By bracketing habits of thought and experience, the phenomenological *epoché* is a non-pathological and potentially productive way of defamiliarizing sedimented perception patterns and drawing attention to the strangeness of things in their facticity. It tears off the veil of familiarity, challenging us to rediscover the world “as if we were seeing it for the first time”.

Translating those reflections into the field of aesthetics, Rebenitsch shows how a similar uncanny reaction towards the ordinary can also be provoked by artworks calling attention to everyday objects. Her point of departure is an analysis of the challenges that the readymade poses to the philosophy of art, focusing on Danto's influential reflections on those questions. After having visited the first exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* at the Stable Gallery of New York in 1964, Danto asked himself: «What makes the difference between a work of art and something not a work of art when there is no interesting perceptual difference between them?» (Danto, 1997, p. 35). Danto states the difficulty of explaining the categorical difference between art and non-art by recourse to specific perceptible features since it results impossible to distinguish Warhol's artworks from the standard Brillo soap boxes through sense perception. Therefore, he concludes that it is necessary «to turn from sense experience to thought» (Danto, 1997, p. 13), thus moving from the aesthetics, intended as the science of sense perception, to an ontology of art. According to Danto, the artworks have an ontological feature peculiar to them and lacking in ordinary objects: a metaphorical structure. An artwork always refers to an external meaning; consequently, Danto speaks of their aboutness (the semantic capacity of “being about something”) and of their embodied meanings (the meanings embodied

in the material form of the artwork).

Rebentisch criticizes this explanatory model because it assumes a sharp contrast between sense experience and thought, thus leading to banishing the material and sensorial dimension from the artistic discourse. On the contrary, for Rebentisch «the materiality of the artwork, which emerges in its sensorial visualization (*Anschauung*), is rather an aspect of the specific aesthetic appearance» (Rebentisch, 2013b, p. 131), and it contributes to producing its meanings. Every detail of the artwork, which arises from its materiality and the modes of its perception, is significant. For example, Danto overlooks – or decides not to be significant – that the Brillo soup pads sold in supermarkets are made of cardboard, while Warhol's reproductions are made of silkscreened plywood (Herwitz, 1993). Warhol's works, therefore, own different optical and haptic qualities, as they are smoother and shinier. Rebentisch also considers other famous readymades, such as Duchamp's porcelain urinal with the title *Fountain*. The distorted orientation of the urinal (turned by 90 degrees), the signature R. Mutt (one of the pseudonyms of the artist) on the lower left corner, and the presentation with an ironical title alter the familiar sensory experience with this everyday object.

Rebentisch shows that such artistic interventions and displacements, even if minimal, are crucial to modify the identity of use-objects, moving them into the sphere of aesthetic experience. While everyday items usually lay unnoticed under the attention threshold, these artistic dislocations drive the spectators to confront their materiality and engage in a different, more careful sensory experience with them. In fact, once transformed into enigmatic objects of interpretation, «every element of their sensuous appearance, as well as every element of their staging, becomes potentially significant» (Rebentisch, 2013b, p. 133, my translation). By moving everyday objects out of their opaque familiarity, such an aesthetic experience evokes the feeling of uncanny. Whereas such items are usually «too commonplace, too banal, too close for us to notice their specific configuration» (Rebentisch, 2013b, p. 133), now they regain volume and form and appear in all their strange and fascinating thingness. As Cavell, also Rebentisch describes the uncanny as a disturbing and subverting feeling, yet not destructive or annihilating. It is unsettling because it challenges habitual and apparently self-evident mechanisms of experience, but thereby it also fosters a new attentiveness towards the ordinary.

Another artistic example of the uncanniness of the ordinary discussed by Rebentisch is the work of Dan Flavin. Such an example is particularly significant because it clarifies that, for

Rebentisch, the uncanny is not associated with a horrific situation but with a destabilizing sensorial experience. Flavin's installations with fluorescent light tubes have nothing shocking; they create an immersive space of dazzling color with a radiant and lyrical quality. Yet Rebentisch notices that, despite the overwhelming visual splendor of the light effects, Flavin also draws attention to the lamp as a material support of light. In addition to its fascinating optical quality, Flavin's work has a less evident but penetrating acoustic dimension. Neon lamps emit a steady electrical hum, which reminds us of their physical presence. Neon tubes, and more broadly, the physical medium generating light, typically slip in the background of daily perception, approximating invisibility. Such objects are present only in a technical and functional sense as "ready-to-hand", using the Heideggerian terminology to describe the forgetful and inattentive relationship with use-objects. Flavin instead let emerge the «abyssal presence of the light tubes» (Rebentisch, 2013a, p. 68), intended as an aesthetic manifestation through which those items step out of the shadows in which they were confined and appear in their material and sensorial "objectuality". The matter-of-factness of the lamp still shines through the gaseous fluorescent glow: «the physical fact of the tube as object in place prevailed» (Flavin, 1966, p. 28). Therefore, Rebentisch concludes that the aesthetic experience with these use-objects evokes a feeling of estrangement and disorientation but also of curiosity, a willingness to reappropriate the ordinary.

It is now possible to summarize the main aspects of Rebentisch's proposal to rethink the uncanny within aesthetics, starting with those features already present in Freud's essay and getting lost through its postmodern reinterpretations. a) The uncanny is not just a way of thinking and deconstructing reality – and, therefore, it is not a political, ethical, or epistemological tool – but a particular feeling. For this reason, at the very beginning of his essay Freud claims that the uncanny should be explained within aesthetics; «when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling» (Freud, 1974, p. 219). b) Such a feeling is caused by the encounter with specific artistic and aesthetic objects and not only by a menacing yet undetermined sense of ambiguity. Framing the uncanny as an object-directed feeling enables us to distinguish it clearly from its postmodern interpretation as a vague existential mood⁵². c) The conceptual core of the uncanny

⁵² Windsor also defines the uncanny as «an affective state directed toward particular objects in the world» (Windsor 2019, 55).

is not represented by the ambivalence and the undecidability but by the appearance of something familiar in a new, unfamiliar light.

Rebentisch also adds two other aspects to this classical conceptual core. d) The uncanny is a feeling due to a twist in how reality is sensorially perceived, revealing something hidden from the visual sphere. In this respect, Rebentisch follows Lacan's and Didi-Huberman's intuition to associate the uncanny with an alteration of the focal point that disturbs established regimes of visibility and allows something hitherto concealed to emerge. In Rebentisch's reading, this disturbing sensory appearance is strictly bounded to a break of the iterative structure of everyday life. This structure is stabilizing and reassuring, but it blends the contours of what lies before our eyes, turning the familiar into a nebulous background. Therefore, the experience of focusing on a detail of this hazy scenery in which everyday life is staged uncovers aspects hidden in plain sight with a disquieting effect. However, thanks to the influence of Cavell, Rebentisch introduces a radical novelty in comparison to the classical association of the uncanny with anxiety, central to Freud's account but also to Lacan's and Didi-Huberman's proposals. e) The uncanny is not only frightening and inherently threatening but this disturbing affective state is accompanied by a new attentiveness towards the obviousness of the everyday, enhancing new ways of sensory experiencing the well-known: «the return of the ordinary as uncanny demands an active, committed attitude towards it» (Rebentisch, 2013a, 67).

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