

# HYB26

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**The Hotel Yearbook**  
Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

HY8



# Foreword by the Editor-in-Chief: The Olympia Effect

**Simone Puerto**

*Head of Emerging Trends and Strategic Innovation, Hospitality Net*



## REVERSE UNCANNY VALLEY, STADE DU MIROIR, AND HUMANS-AS-LUXURY IN THE FUTURE OF HOSPITALITY

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*He had never had such a perfect listener. [...] She stared fixedly at her lover for hours on end, without moving a muscle, and her gaze grew ever more ardent and more animated.*

— E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Der Sandmann*

### INTRODUCTION

One of my favorite short stories of all time is *Der Sandmann* by German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann. At first reading, it is a Gothic tale about childhood trauma, but beneath the surface lies something far more unsettling: a philosophical autopsy of the fragile boundary between the human and the artificial, and, perhaps, a cautionary tale about the hospitality of tomorrow.

### THE TALE OF OLYMPIA [SPOILER ALERT]

The story follows Nathanael, a young student haunted by childhood memories tied to Coppelius, an acquaintance of his father whom he associates with the folkloric Sandman, the creature said to steal the eyes of children who refuse to sleep.

One night, Nathanael secretly witnesses Coppelius and his father conducting strange alchemical experiments. Soon after, his father dies, and Coppelius disappears.

Years later, Nathanael encounters an Italian optical salesman named Coppola, whom he immediately suspects to be Coppelius under another identity. Around the same time, he falls deeply in love with Olympia, the beautiful daughter of one of his professors, despite the fact that everyone around him senses something profoundly unnatural in her behavior. Eventually, the horrifying truth emerges: Olympia is not human at all, but an automaton created by Coppola and the professor.

### DAS UNHEIMLICHE

What makes *Der Sandmann* extraordinary is not simply that it introduces one of literature's earliest automatons. Hoffmann is not interested in robots in the Asimovian sense. Instead, he destabilizes the very criteria through which we recognize humanity itself. And, when read through the lens of hospitality, the story anticipates, by almost two centuries, the human-machine tension only now emerging within an industry built on the granitic assumption that “human beings serving other human beings” (“H2H”) is fundamentally irreplaceable.

The genius of Hoffmann lies in the fact that Olympia is not, at least initially, presented as obviously artificial, and the horror unfolds almost imperceptibly. At first, she appears refined, elegant, composed, and attentive. In many ways, she is the perfect host: always listening, never interrupting, endlessly patient, “completely invisible, yet always in sight,” to quote Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Only gradually do we, as readers, begin to sense that something is wrong. Nathanael, meanwhile, remains the only one who truly fails to recognize what Olympia is (and is not), because he cannot psychologically afford to see it. His desire overrides his perception, and the uncanny emerges not simply from artificiality itself, but from his willingness, perhaps even his need, to emotionally collaborate with the illusion.

### THE FIRST LEVEL: THE UNCANNY VALLEY OF PERFECT CUSTOMER SERVICE

The first layer of uncanniness in *Der Sandmann* is perceptual. Long before robotics professor Masahiro Mori formulated the “Uncanny Valley” theory (the psychological phenomenon in which robots, CGI characters, avatars, or even conversational AI systems appear nearly human, yet remain subtly “off” in a way that triggers unease, revulsion, or cognitive dissonance), Hoffmann had already intuited its core mechanism: Olympia appears almost human, but not entirely. And the uncanniness emerges precisely from that single adverb: “almost.” It is no coincidence that Freud later used Hoffmann's story in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny).

Back to our industry, anyone who has interacted with a hotel chatbot, an AI concierge, or a CRM recognizes this sensation immediately: the greeting uses your name, the syntax is flawless, the tone is warm, on-brand, and professionally empathetic, and yet something feels strangely unnatural.

This is Hoffmann's Paradox: the closer artificial service comes to perfectly simulating humanity, the more visible the absence at its center becomes.

### THE SECOND LEVEL: OLYMPIA AS THE IDEAL HOSPITALITY WORKER

The second level of Hoffmann's uncanniness is relational, and here things become genuinely disturbing. Olympia behaves in a way that perfectly accommodates Nathanael's desires: she listens endlessly, never interrupts, contradicts, or resists interpretation.

Sounds familiar? Models like ChatGPT are intentionally trained to maximize conversational pleasantness. Through mechanisms such as Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback, these systems are rewarded for producing responses that feel helpful, agreeable, supportive, but also almost entirely frictionless, thereby creating a (dangerous) bubble of self-reference.

In this sense, Hoffmann seems to anticipate something Hegel was elaborating around the same period: the idea that self-consciousness emerges only through the encounter with another consciousness that resists us. Nathanael, deprived of this resistance, collapses inward, spiraling deeper into his own biases, because nothing outside him ever forces him to leave the comfort of his own self.

## HOSPITALITY IS LACANIAN (OR WE'RE ALL JUST LITTLE BABIES IN A LOBBY)

And this brings me to the next point. I have said this many times: I believe hospitality is profoundly Lacanian. In French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan's theory of the *stade du miroir*, children initially experience the world as something perfectly aligned with their own needs. Hunger appears, and food arrives. The baby cries, and the mother shows up.

For a brief moment, we all experience reality as if it revolved entirely around ourselves, and (good) hospitality succeeds when it is able to recreate something similar by temporarily restoring the fantasy that the world revolves harmoniously around our existence, that our desires matter, and that they should be fulfilled immediately. We become, once again, the center of the universe.

Because we are all, without exception, just little babies in a lobby.

But mirrors require invisible labor: for the guest to inhabit this illusion of centrality, someone else must absorb the complexity behind it. The ideal service interaction is, therefore, one in which the employee appears just human enough to simulate warmth, but not human enough to disrupt the fantasy. And this is precisely why Olympia is so unsettling: she is not the opposite of the hospitality ideal; she is hospitality on steroids, a perfectly optimized surface for narcissistic reflection (and isn't "optimized surface for narcissistic reflection"™ a great tagline for a luxury hotel brand?).

The difficult question today is whether guests, when given the choice between resistant human interaction (in the Hegelian sense) and non-resistant artificial interaction, will increasingly make the same choice Nathanael made. In my paper "Humans-as-Luxury: The Future of Hospitality in an AI-Driven Age," I argued that the answer would be no. But I am no longer so sure...

## THE THIRD LEVEL: THE TELESCOPE AND THE ALGORITHMIC GUEST EXPERIENCE

The third level of uncanniness is mediation. Der Sandmann is saturated with devices of augmented reality: spectacles, lenses, telescopes, binoculars. Nathanael never truly sees something; he always sees through something. And paradoxically, the more technologically enhanced his perception becomes, the less capable he is of distinguishing reality from delusion.

In many ways, Coppola's recurring cry, "Pretty eyes! Pretty eyes!", while selling optical instruments throughout the story, feels like the nineteenth-century ancestor of Zuckerberg's Ray-Ban Meta Smart Glasses: technologies that promise enhanced perception while simultaneously rewriting reality itself. The parallel with contemporary hospitality is difficult to ignore: guest data platforms, sentiment analysis tools, AI-powered upselling engines, and predictive personalization systems continuously filter, score, segment, and reconstruct the guest into a curated profile designed for optimization and action, a simulacrum.

## THE FOURTH LEVEL: ARE THE HOSTS MECHANICAL TOO?

Yet the story's most disturbing movement arrives at its deepest ontological layer. The scene that still sends chills down my spine to this day is not the revelation that Olympia is an automaton, but the childhood episode in which the evil Coppelius manipulates Nathanael's body as if the child himself were assembled from artificial parts. At that moment, the uncanny reverses completely. Now, let's consider what already happens to human service workers inside heavily automated hotels: greetings are scripted, interactions timed, sentiment monitored through AI, and deviations from protocol flagged automatically. Upselling suggestions are generated by revenue systems, schedules are optimized by algorithms, and feedback scores are tracked in real time and tied directly to performance reviews. Human-on-the-loop at best. Human-out-of-the-loop at worst. The perfect receptionist of tomorrow is, *de facto*, Olympia.

## "REVERSE UNCANNY VALLEY" OR THE "OLYMPIA EFFECT"

And this is what I call the "Hospitality Reverse Uncanny Valley," or the "Olympia Effect." My concern is the inverse of Mori's: humans becoming so optimized, scripted, emotionally regulated, and system-dependent that they themselves begin to feel artificial. The empty smile repeated 300 times per shift, the receptionist staring more at the PMS than at the guest, the heads-down "How are you today?" delivered with the cadence of a notification system. We have all experienced it as guests, haven't we?

Long before AI, hospitality had already perfected the art of the emotionally optimized mask. As Octavio Paz observed in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the repeated social smile eventually ceases to be expression and becomes defense, ritual, and, ultimately, armor. And the timing is not accidental: we are entering this phase precisely as worker disengagement is exploding globally. Quiet quitting, burnout, emotional exhaustion, chronic understaffing: hospitality is especially vulnerable to all of it. The paradox is almost cruel: the more hospitality systems attempt to engineer perfect emotional consistency, the more emotionally absent the workforce itself risks becoming.

## PHILOXENIA AND THE HOTELIER'S OATH

Now, let's go back a few more centuries: the word "hospitality" derives from the Latin "hospes," a term that simultaneously means "host" and "guest," "stranger" and "welcomer." Embedded within the word itself is the recognition that hospitality was never merely transactional, but rather relational, and profoundly human. For the ancient Greeks, this bond was sacred: *philoxenia*, the love of the stranger. A moral obligation toward the unknown other. I have often said that perhaps hospitality should have its own "Hippocratic-Hotelier's Oath": a commitment to preserve the sacredness of the H2H relationship at the center of the industry. The real dystopia of Der Sandmann is not that machines might eventually become perfect hosts, but that we might stop noticing the difference. Or worse: that, not unlike Nathanael, we might notice, and prefer it anyway.

## **ABOUT THIS EDITION OF THE YEARBOOK: THE GOTHIC FLATLINE**

The initial editorial idea for this edition of the Yearbook came to me after reading *Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction* by British writer, cultural theorist, and philosopher Mark Fisher. In it, Fisher introduces the concept of the “gothic flatline,” a liminal zone where distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the artificial dissolve. The more I reflected on that idea, the more I realized how profoundly it resonated with the historical moment hospitality is now entering, and this Yearbook was conceived as an attempt to explore that unstable territory. Rather than offering simplistic predictions or techno-utopian narratives, this edition brings together philosophers, technologists, futurists, designers, strategists, architects, and hospitality leaders to collectively think through the uncertainty of the present.

Contributors such as Zoltan Istvan, Leonardo Caffo, James Watson, and Jonathan MacDonald approach the future from radically different perspectives, creating not a single ideological narrative but rather a kind of intellectual constellation. Structurally, the Yearbook follows the arc of the guest journey (pre-stay, mid-stay, and post-stay), with one underlying conviction: that the future of hospitality will no longer be definable exclusively from within hospitality itself.

Compiling this edition has also been, on a personal level, an extraordinary intellectual journey. Many of the ideas in these pages challenged my own assumptions, expanded my thinking, and forced me to confront how unstable many of our conceptual categories are becoming. I learned an enormous amount while reading, editing, organizing, and reflecting on these contributions. No filter bubbles here, dear reader. No algorithmic reassurance loops. No “Olympia silently reflecting your own assumptions back at you.” I genuinely hope that, while reading this Yearbook, you experience at least part of the same curiosity, intellectual vertigo, excitement, and sense of discovery that I felt while putting it together.

Enjoy the ride.

