The Uncanny in Language, Literature and Culture

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Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter Nine: Semantic and Cultural Interpretations of Jerzy Czerniawski's Theatre Posters: "Whatever we Touch Upon in these Works, we Always Get Lost in the Obscurity of Secrets"

Chapter Ten: The Uncanny Object in Magical Realist Cinema: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie*.

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As though to prove the points considered within this collected work, the uncanniness of life, for a while, interrupted the completion of this book.

We would therefore like to especially thank all the contributors, and Adam Rummens of Cambridge Scholars, for their support and patience while we, and the world, got back to a post-pandemic norm.

The origin of this collection was the result of two one-day international conferences, "The Uncanny in Language, Literature and Culture", held in September 2016 and again in August 2017. The conferences encouraged an exploration into the representations of the uncanny on topics including language, literature and visual language.

We are grateful to Dr Olena Lytovka and Maria Isaienkova for organising the conference through the Interdisciplinary Research Foundation (IRF) and the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (LCIR). Thank you also to hosts in Warsaw, Poland in 2016 and Birkbeck, University of London in 2017.

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We are grateful to colleagues, family, and friends, who supported us throughout the production of this book.

SS, CJ, & CM

INTRODUCTION: UNCANNY ORIGINS

SARAH STOLLMAN, CHARLIE JORGE AND CATHERINE MORRIS

> "Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus?
> Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin?"
>
> — Roland Barthes [1]

The beginnings of this book were founded in, what seemed to be back then, less uncanny times. Just as the publication of Sigmund Freud's "*Das Unheimliche*" in 1919 does not directly focus on the First World War through which it was conceived and written, (though Freud does make two references to it, which I will return to), nor do the essays within this book obviously reflect the historical context within which they began and were subsequently developed. However, it would be difficult now not to consider, with hindsight, the years in which "The Uncanny" was conceived, or of Freud's personal experiences of the war, and of the changing, ambivalent world which perhaps came to haunt his ideas. He noted in 1919: "I'm not a patriot, but it is painful to think that pretty much the whole world will be foreign territory".[2] Similarly, it would be remiss not to reflect briefly on the temporality within which *The Uncanny in Language, Literature and Culture* was conceived and written, as a way of continuing to attempt to seek and underpin the origin of the uncanny.

Nearly one hundred years after the publication of "The Uncanny", the 2016 and 2017 conferences at which these papers were first presented took place during a time of increasing worldwide political uncertainty and polarisation. This was particularly the case in London, the location of the 2017 conference, as our understanding of what being "at home" meant had been disrupted by the Brexit vote one year prior. The previous conference took place in that same year, 2016, in Warsaw. The Brexit bill meant that

[1] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 47.
[2] Freud, as quoted in Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, 380.

Poland, being a member of the European Union (EU), was now to be disconnected from the United Kingdom (UK). The build-up to the vote seemed to expose and bring to light an unsettling secret, but was it, as Freud expressed, a bid for "[f]reedom [as] the quiet watchword of secret conspirators, the loud war-cry of revolutionaries",[3] or an old xenophobia, "once well known [that] had long been familiar",[4] concealed and repressed for some time, now returned? The debate caused a rupture between families and friends, and communities and countries within the UK, and EU and, from the 2016 vote to the official enactment of Brexit through the withdrawal of the UK from the EU on 31st January 2020, there was a period of liminality. Britons living in European countries, and indeed Brits in Britain, having voted to leave or remain, questioned whether their home was now unhomely, as did Europeans living in Britain. What further destabilisation and strangeness, in what had previously felt so secure and familiar, was going to be exposed in order to achieve this uncertain aim? As it had been for Freud a century before, the apprehension of everything we knew becoming foreign loomed ahead.

Simultaneously the worldwide Covid pandemic originated, emerging into public consciousness via news reports from China and Italy, and, by the end of January 2020, twenty-six countries had reported official cases. It would take until March before the official lockdown of most nations began, and so began an eerie and unsettling time, with anxieties of the unclean, the "hidden and the dangerous"[5] and of "death, [and] dead bodies"[6] coming into our homes. Images of the seriously unwell, sedated, inverted, and intubated, or else of piles of body bags in Spain, and mass graves in New York flooded our TV screens as though we were watching a film about revenants, except this was the real world. All this was taking place while the banality of work and school life was expected to continue, but from home. With the exception of key workers, who had to face the unknown danger every day outside, we worked for hours at a time at a screen, away from friends and colleagues, except occasionally seeing them over that same screen. We were also often separated from family who were only a room away doing the same thing: producing data to be shared on a cloud and stored on devices in warehouses many miles away. This almost robotic existence, with the ability to tip us into uncanny valley territory, allowed us to continue with an attempt of life as normal. Though normal life was now defined by the uncanny mechanisation and alienation of the human body and mind working toward

[3] Goethe, as quoted in Freud, "The Uncanny," 130.
[4] Freud, 124.
[5] Freud, 134.
[6] Freud, 148.

an uncertain future and the benefit of an externalised economic machine, while people around the world died. At the same time, conspiracies circled the internet about the reality of the events taking place, creating even more division and uncertainty, reminding us of the uncanniness of our time, where deep fakes of this extent *could* be possible. This impact echoes Freud's assertion that

> an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes.[7]

Outside the home, strict rules on maintaining safe distances from other people increased our isolation from others, and mask-wearing reduced us all to faceless, mumbling pairs of eyes, which for some was essential human healthcare, but to others an existential threat to humanity. Did anti-maskers consider it simply a threat to the individual right to choose, or did they regard it as something even more uncanny? The notion that someone may have something to hide, or a xenophobic reaction to those in the world who routinely wear masks for medical purposes or face coverings for religious or cultural observation, may have caused such an uncanniness. Or did the practice become something more unsettling and animistic, a hidden non-human threat, veiled from sight?[8] This observation may return us once more to the Freudian castration complex, where a fear arises for the physical safety of our body parts, and in this case, our exposed eyes, or else a knowledge, once known to us but repressed, which returns and is revealed again before our eyes.[9] What is that knowledge and, as one of our contributors, Per Klingberg, asks, "how *does* one speak of the uncanny without turning it into something all too familiar then?"[10]

Freud points to such fears as the return of our primal fear of "secret harmful forces and the return of the dead".[11] He explains that despite "having *surmounted* such modes of thought […] we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions".[12] Post-pandemic, the effects are still apparent in our day to day interactions with others, the changed ways in which we work and travel, and perhaps also in our approach to viewing life

[7] Freud, 150.
[8] Freud, 132.
[9] Freud, 139.
[10] Klingberg, "On the Uncanny Aesthetics of Lucy Clifford's "'New Mother'," 85; emphasis in original.
[11] Freud, "The Uncanny," 154.
[12] Freud, 154.

and the world. Even the notion of normal may be seen as uncanny as many people determine to get back to what may be considered normal. Ordinary life became, for a time, threatening and sinister, but we're not quite sure that it isn't still, or that it wasn't before. These anxieties exist on a continuum; no sooner did the height of the pandemic pass, before we entered headlong into a raft of new concerns of international conflict, climate crisis, and economic instability, contributing to further expose our "wishful fears".[13] Similarly, Hugh Haughton describes the aesthetic of the uncanny in his introduction to Freud's essay, identifying its part in the "profound re-mapping of the whole psychoanalytic project during and after the First World War […] increasingly conjur[ing] up a Gothic closet, an uncanny double, at the heart of modernity".[14] Haughton continues to describe "The Uncanny" as "one of Freud's strangest essays […] about a particularly intense experience of strangeness, [that suggests] it is our own and our culture's disowned past that haunts us".[15] The aftermath of such an event supersedes any notion of the supernatural; the effect echoes the strangeness of the known world.

This outcome is reflected in Kevin Aho's paper on the Heideggerian nature of the uncanny during the Covid pandemic. He explores the impact of the pandemic in disrupting the stable and familiar "homelike mood" we normally exist within.[16] The way we self-interpret our existence based on an implied expectation of understanding the world around us and ourselves within it, suggests that just as canny/uncanny is related to knowing/not knowing, "to exist is essentially […] *to understand*".[17] Further, this perception requires an ability to project our future possibilities, based on this existing knowledge of our self and world, so when that worldview is disrupted, we are left with a sense of un-self, "stuck in a continuous present".[18] Furthermore, this recognition requires us to know and understand ourselves in relation to others and the world in which we live and so, as Aho argues, the stay-at-home policy intended to keep us safe (and did, if arguably somewhat belatedly), also put us at risk, resulting in a number of psychological, behavioural, social, and emotional

[13] Haughton, introduction to *The Uncanny*, by Freud, xlii.
[14] Haughton, xlii.
[15] Haughton, xlii.
[16] Aho, "The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics: Heideggerian Reflections on the Coronavirus," 4.
[17] Heidegger, as quoted in Aho, 3; emphasis in original.
[18] Aho, 8.

complications.[19] Again, referring to Heidegger, Aho asserts that, during the crisis, we didn't just experience or feel the uncanny, but became it ourselves:

> "[the uncanny] is the basic determination of [human existence] itself" [meaning that] in the most primordial sense, the comforting and familiar experience of *das Heimliche* was an illusion all along, that we are not and never have been at-home in the world.[20]

As the contributors to this book live in disparate countries—Australia, Austria, Norway, Poland, The United Kingdom, Spain, and Sweden—the range of interpretations of the concept of the uncanny reflects the differences evident in response to the pandemic. From one affect, that of the uncanny and of the pandemic, many directions can be taken by a people and a culture. However, the essence of the experience holds disparate humans together. As Aho suggests, the loss of the familiar uncovers whether it existed at all. Through these chapters, the common human experience of the uncanny, can be seen as enfolding together many people from across the globe. In Dylan Trigg's work exploring the role of memory and the uncanny within a sense of place, he refers to the uncanny sensation of topophopia, a condition he defines as "a form of spatiotemporal homesickness that is fundamentally disturbed in character". [21] This universal ailment was experienced by innumerable people during the pandemic, as many remained in their homes, yet their relationship to home as place was altered. Others were obliged to go to hospital or to stay in places that became temporary homes. Many died in remote places, detached from community. These altered places rallied us to cling to what we had lost. This effect of illness and lockdown reflects Trigg's notion of homesickness inducing "an abiding sense of derealization".[22] These sensations during the pandemic arose not necessarily from the loss of place, but of place as we knew it, further deepening the uncanny effect. Therefore, in this case, and in the case of war, the uncanny becomes a meta-concept for experiences of dislocation and the altered existence of place and self.

Returning to Freud, the only references he makes of the First World War in the writing of *The Uncanny* are a brief mention of the "isolation"[23] he felt during the war itself, and an observation of the apparent need of the populace, post-war, to connect "with the souls of the departed",[24] both of

[19] Aho, 10-13.
[20] Aho, 3.
[21] Trigg, *Memory of Place*, 194.
[22] Trigg, 194.
[23] Freud, "The Uncanny," 151.
[24] Freud, 148-9.

which resonate with life during the pandemic. Freud describes that during his war-induced loneliness, he read a story published in 1917 in *The Strand Magazine*, which, though unattributed in "The Uncanny", is known to be L.G. Moberley's "Inexplicable".[25] The imagined "ghostly crocodiles" in the story were not at all at home in their London middle class domestic setting, but were apparently brought into the home through the lifelike carvings within a strange wooden table, left by the mysterious previous tenant.[26] Subsequently the alligators seemed to infect the minds and sensibilities of all those residing within the house, until the table was removed and burnt. The second reference Freud makes to the war is to the "[p]lacards in our big cities [that] advertise lectures […] meant to instruct us in how to make contact with the souls of the departed",[27] which has almost the opposite effect of wishing to bring home those who we believe should still be with us. In both cases, one of literature and one of culture, Freud appears to be trying to make sense of hauntings, etymologically relating to home via Old Norse and Old Norman, meaning, more specifically, to return, or to bring home. In the first sense, the sinister alligators were brought into the home, like a disease, into a place they shouldn't be. They became a threat to all that remained within the home, necessitating exorcism and banishment. Whereas in the second sense, the departed souls were not at home where they theoretically should have been, and were wished by those who remained behind to return home. Freud speaks of the idea held that "whoever dies becomes the enemy of the survivor, intent upon carrying him off with him to share his new existence",[28] and this certainly seems to be the case with the ghostly alligators lurking with intent to drag the residents into the darkness, as they did through a character's remembrance of the horrifying loss of a dear friend in an alligator swamp in New Guinea.[29] Yet, it seems the living would wish to drag the dead back to life or, rather, know that there isn't an ambivalent darkness after death, that there is a sense of a known future hereafter in which to join the dead. Both references suggest a sense of loneliness linked to the uncanny; the effect of *The Strand Magazine* story on Freud during his own isolated time, which he referred to as being "extraordinarily uncanny",[30] is writ large through the enormous sense of loss and loneliness felt by the populace following the passing of loved ones

[25] Moberley, "The Inexplicable," 572-581.
[26] Freud refers to the alligators in the story as crocodiles, "The Uncanny," 151.
[27] Freud, "The Uncanny," 148.
[28] Freud, 149.
[29] Moberley, "Inexplicable," 577-578.
[30] Freud, "The Uncanny," 151.

during the war, contributing to an increased desire to make contact with the dead.

The times that Freud lived through, and arguably all times of recountable conflict and crises, contribute to our collective uncanny mindset. We are, in and of ourselves, *unheimlich*, simply because, due to the uncertainty of life and death itself, we are never quite at home in our home, within the world, or within ourselves. In times of relative peace, we may be able to repress our ambivalence and plan for the future, but the underlying truth that we cannot possibly know what the future holds for us, collectively or as individuals, reminds us that we are not in any true control of our past, present, future, or time hereafter. Events such as the First World War, or the Covid pandemic, expose a repressed and unsettling reality that we know nothing, making the English translation of the *heimlich*/*unheimlich* duality as uncanny all the more emphatic; through "The Uncanny" Freud was able to uncover the phenomenon's very origin—ourselves.

The current volume has been organised using a system of interconnected rubrics, offering a flexible framework for analysis and a rich selection of relevant topics, resulting in a loose narrative order. This approach effectively balances competing aims of comprehensive coverage and innovative insight. The volume is divided into three parts: Part I focuses on Language, Part II on Literature, and Part III on Visual Language.

The primary objective of Part I is to explore the presence of the uncanny in language elements, dialects, and other linguistic attributes. In this context, Gary Farnell's work entitled "The Vegetal Uncanny" delves into the intriguing relationship between plants and humans, viewing humans from an alt-anthropomorphic, or even a post-human perspective. Farnell contends that plants possess an uncanny quality, appearing both familiar and strange, and notably focuses on the phenomenon of talking plants. This phenomenon, suggestive of fabled tales of screaming mandrakes, aligns remarkably well with scientific findings on a plant's communicative capabilities. To illustrate this perspective, Farnell examines narratives featuring talking plants, such as Lewis Carroll's "Garden of Live Flowers" from *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Through this focus, Farnell demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the vegetal uncanny, highlighting its significance in the broader context of literature, language, and scientific discoveries.

Catherine Morris's "'The Language that Yer Mam Spoke': Dialect as *Unheimlich* in British Writing" explores the utilisation of dialect in literature, drawing inspiration from Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919) in her analysis. Morris argues that the incorporation of dialect creates a sense of tension in the text between the portrayal of familiarity and unsettling,

uncanny elements. This tension arises from the use of non-standard language within standard literary forms, giving rise to uncertainties and anxieties related to themes of madness, rebellion, castration, feminisation, degeneration, and abjection. To examine the liminal role of dialect in the works of Tony Harrison, William Shakespeare, Emily Brontë and Irvine Welsh, Morris draws on sociolinguistic studies exploring regional and social dialects. She also incorporates psychoanalytical theories of Julia Kristeva (1982), particularly regarding the concept of the abject. Through these lenses, Morris reveals how an author's incorporation of dialect in their work, as a literary approach, is intertwined with an *unheimlich* mindset shared by both writer and reader, as influenced by cultural and historical contexts.

The second part of this volume delves into the exploration of the presence of the uncanny in literature, an investigation that can be traced back to Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919/2003); a discussion that remains relevant today. Freud's essay was partly informed by themes and events in the E.T.A. Hoffmann short story "The Sandman" (1817). Building on this foundation, the following section will examine various literary elements related to the uncanny, many of which originate from the Gothic tradition, folktale and the eerie. This section commences with a focus on the cautionary tale, as analysed by Per Klingberg, in his chapter entitled "On the Uncanny Aesthetics of Lucy Clifford's 'The New Mother'". Klingberg suggests that the 19th century story's abundance of mysterious and inexplicable imagery surpasses the expected moral framework of a traditional cautionary tale. He argues that it is precisely the uncanny nature of Clifford's imagery that enables the story to transcend its historical context, giving rise to new, unsettling interpretations for contemporary readers.

Moving from the cautionary tale to the Gothic or, perhaps, esoteric, Sten Wistrand explores the theme of revenge and the question of genre in Gustav Meyrink's novel, *The Golem* (1915), through an analysis of the role of the uncanny. In his work, "The Revenge of the Uncanny: Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* and the Question of Genre", Wistrand delves into the interplay of different genres employed by Meyrink in the novel, prompting an enquiry into whether the uncanny serves as the driving force behind the narrative or as the primary objective of the story itself. Ultimately, the impact of the uncanny motifs lies more in their effects rather than in their structural function, leading to what could be described as the "revenge of the uncanny".[31] In other words, the uncanny elements assert their power and

[31] Wistrand, "The Revenge of the Uncanny: Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* and the Question of Genre," 109.

influence over the narrative, overshadowing the traditional structural elements thereby making a significant impact on the story.

In "The Continually Uncanny in Kafka's *The Trial*", Antony Johae delves into the work of the quintessential uncanny author, Franz Kafka. Johae's focus on the novel *The Trial*, published posthumously in 1925, explores the various aspects of the uncanny phenomenon present in the story. The analysis is conducted from two perspectives: that of the reader and that of the protagonist. Johae's main objective, to understand why uncanny experiences occur so frequently in Kafka's text, is approached by delving into the unconscious states present in the narrative. By examining the strangeness of the fiction and how it is rationalised, the chapter aims to reveal how the narrative operates at the level of dreams rather than as a depiction of everyday reality. Through this investigation, Johae highlights the overwhelming prevalence of the uncanny in Kafka's fiction, shedding light on the author's skilful use of the unsettling and eerie elements that appear throughout *The Trial*.

In Marit Aalen and Anders Zachrisson's chapter "The Uncanny Dramatised in a Central Scene in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*", they emphasise the concept that the uncanny revolves around the notion that something familiar can become frightening. According to Freud, the uncanny is understood as a process where something eerie remains hidden within the familiar, eventually breaking through and completely altering the atmosphere and its perception. Freud refers to this process as "the return of what has been repressed".[32] With this in mind, Aalen and Zachrisson analyse a pivotal scene in Peer Gynt, demonstrating how it follows a similar dynamic as described by Freud. However, they argue that Freud's concept of the return of the repressed is inadequate to fully explain the psychodynamic complexities at play in the scene.

Turning to the uncanny within familial relationships and the archetype of the wrongly accused, Charlie Jorge's study "'Before You Were Born, I Devoted You to Him, as the Only Expiation of My Crime': Children as Scapegoat Figures in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*" examines the uncanny as a force that challenges oppressive institutions and behaviours. Jorge argues that scapegoat figures have historically been used to appease deities' wrath, seek redemption for the sins of past generations, or fuel humanity's insatiable desire for social and economic advancement. Throughout the Gothic novel, these sacrificial scapegoats, and their sacrificers, play pivotal roles, leaving a lasting impact on the realms of art, film, and literature. Within the chapter, Jorge delves into the family dynamics of the Monçada and Aliaga circles, to which the two central

[32] Freud, "The Uncanny," 155.

characters of the novel belong. His analysis reveals the events that lead to the disruption and collapse of these family relationships. Ultimately, the characters find themselves in situations where they are symbolically sacrificed.

Concluding the second part of this volume and its analysis of the uncanny in literature, Othmar Lehner and Charlotte Sweet delve into the concept of the uncanny as a unique psychodynamic experience that weaves together the familiar and the eerie, as manifested in non-coincidental synchronistic events. Within their chapter, "Tracing Our Uncanny Selves in Post-Modern Fiction", Lehner and Sweet explore how the uncanny intertwines with trauma theory, themes that have seen a resurgence in post-modern narratives and that provide a guiding framework for this exploration. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* (2005) and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* (2016) serve as the foundation for an investigation into the uncanny dimensions of fundamental human behaviours such as eating, sexuality, emotional bonding, and judgement. Given that these novels span fifteen years within a largely homogenous western cultural context, the analysis potentially signifies the emergence of a novel, post-modern zeitgeist.

Part III of this volume focuses on visual language and begins by exploring Elwira Bolek's study "Semantic and Cultural Interpretations of Jerzy Czerniawski's Theatre Posters: 'Whatever we Touch Upon in these Works, we Always Get Lost in the Obscurity of Secrets'". Bolek posits that the visual communication of a poster involves a perception of iconic images through mental representations or concepts stored in the mind, which contribute to the transmission of meaning in the poster's visual language. To fully dissect the visual tropes employed in Czerniawski's distinct posters, one must possess knowledge of numerous historical and cultural contexts, while also considering both verbal associations and visual symbols, including the profound symbolism and semantics of the colours used in the works. By interpreting select examples of his posters, this study reveals that the true meaning of Czerniawski's creations is grasped by acknowledging the intricate interplay of visual elements that portray known representation.

To complete this section, Sarah Stollman examines magical realist cinema, in her chapter "The Uncanny Object in Magical Realist Cinema: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001)", arguing that cinema, as a visual storytelling medium, offers a sensational canvas to evoke emotions through the uncanny. In the realm of magical realist film fiction, stories are established in real and authentic contexts while interweaving moments of inexplicable magic throughout the narrative. This juxtaposition of the real and the magical aligns with the concept of the uncanny, which also critically

contains elements both familiar and eerie. Central to this exploration is the role objects play in triggering mysterious and unsettling events within the plot of a given story. By liberating the familiar, objects satisfy a character's fundamental need for a known and secure starting point in their sensorial journey towards a new conception of their identity formation. Stollman's chapter delves into the connections between magical realist cinema and the uncanny, highlighting the significance of the uncanny object in narrating stories.

In his attempts to define the uncanny, Freud describes this effect as being inexorably embedded in what is frightening, horrific, or other. This sensation is concurrently lodged in things domestic and familiar, suggesting a strange union between the dangerous and unknown and the supposed security of a familiar place. This unsettled feeling is emitted, not only from place and home, but from within oneself. A frisson of fear and comfort can materialise from an experience of traumatic loss. This distress often involves time disruption causing the past to resurface in the present, especially unresolved circumstances. The memory traces are revised as they are interwoven with fresh experiences producing the uncanny effect through sometimes altered recollections.

The exploration of these concepts is especially relevant today as, through technology, people develop connections with other places and people, both virtually and physically, throughout the globe. This phenomenon was heavily tested during the recent worldwide pandemic, as people relied on virtual communication, even to speak to someone next door. The recent past, in these experiences, were recalled as a distinct memory as the reality of people's life experience was so radically altered. Trigg refers to this aspect of the uncanny as "*an augmented familiarity*".[33] He describes that "[a]t the heart of this shiver is the sense that what has so far been thought of as inconspicuous in its being is, in fact, charged with a creeping strangeness".[34] The resulting balance of the quotidian and the unknown contribute to the generation of the uncanny. The feeling can be tangible and ephemeral, and it is a sensation experienced in life and portrayed in literature and the visual arts. The sometimes whimsical papers in this book seek to explore the representations of the uncanny in culture through examples of language, literature, and visual language, applying the origins of the concept to experiences of the phenomenon today.

[33] Trigg, *Memory of Place*, 27; emphasis in original.
[34] Trigg, 27.

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PART I

LANGUAGE

CHAPTER ONE

THE VEGETAL UNCANNY

GARY FARNELL

In November 2011, researchers at the Blaustein Institute for Desert Research (BIDR, part of Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) published some of their latest research. The headline was that plants talk to one another. In particular, the research posited that the common pea (Latin name *Pisum sativum*) is capable of communication. The Blaustein researchers discovered that pea plants under drought conditions send "stress cues" to other pea plants in the same soil.[1] These cues are biochemical messages, meant to warn about a lack of moisture, and as such they have real adaptive implications. The Blaustein study is by no means the only one of its kind. Other scientific studies stress the ways in which plants communicate, sometimes not only with other plants, but also with animals.[2] One might ask, who knew? It is humans who have not noticed plant communication, yet we could say that the Blaustein research programme has in fact been pre-scripted, by the "nonsense" author Lewis Carroll. The second of the *Alice* books, *Through the Looking-Glass*, published in 1871, features a wonderful "Garden of Live Flowers". There, Alice says to the Tiger-lily "'I've been in many gardens before, but none of the flowers could talk'". The Tiger-lily replies: "'Put your hand down and feel the ground. […] In most gardens, […] they make the beds too soft–so that the flowers are always asleep'". The narrative continues: "This sounded a very good reason, and Alice was quite pleased to know it. 'I never thought of that before!' she said".[3]

Plants talk to one another when the ground is relatively hard (such as during a drought). They are asleep when gardens are like soft beds; therefore, we can easily understand why humans have not noticed that plants are talking

[1] Falik et al., "Rumor Has It…: Relay Communication of Stress Cues in Plants," para. 22.
[2] See the series of four essays in Gagliano, Ryan and Viera, eds., 1-100.
[3] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 137.

to one another. Think also of mandrakes that squeal when uprooted from the ground. There is a whole literature of the fabulous that is truly prescient regarding scientific discoveries about plants and speech. This prescience, better understood as a form of *pre-science* as imaginative expression, to say nothing of dreaming, is a type of forward-thinking towards the *après coup* of scientific knowledge, whereupon there is no science without fantasy. In what follows we shall see the fantasy of plant self-signification becoming real, with a vengeance. The reality of plants' self-expression is confirmed in the name of science. Here, the truths of fiction in literature and film serve to foreshadow scientific discovery. A representation of that which is vegetal about human beings arises from a certain blurring of "science" and "fiction" associated with the Freudian uncanny. A key shift from Alice talking *to* flowers, to we ourselves as language users talking *with* them, implicitly recognises a shared vegetality. Development of a concept of the uncanny is re-read from a twenty-first-century viewpoint on vegetal life, to illuminate the vegetal uncanny's existence within the uncanny. In this regard, to learn about plant-speech is to learn something different about ourselves within a general economy of the strange. It is time now to take up again with the nonsense of Alice's adventures in Wonderland, to establish a proper perspective.

From Carroll to Freud

Already parodic, in fact, Lewis Carroll's "Garden of Live Flowers" in *Through the Looking Glass* may be seen as a witty reimagining of Tennyson's famous poem of 1855, "Come into the Garden, Maud", with its own series of talking flowers.[4] The degree of wit exhibited in key passages like this one is such that Gilles Deleuze has assigned a privileged place to Carroll in his *Logic of Sense*, stating that this author has "provided the first great account, the first great mise-en-scène of the paradoxes of sense".[5] Carroll has also been seen as a forerunner of the *unheimliche* of Sigmund Freud, due to, among other things, that weird uncanniness of Carroll's talking flowers.[6] Carroll's images point to those pages of Freud's 1919 essay "*Das Unheimliche*", translated as

[4] Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, 563. In particular, see *Maud: A Monodrama*, part 1, section 22, stanza 10 (lines 908-15).
[5] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, xi.
[6] See Hugh Haughton, introduction to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass,* by Carroll xii-xiii; Haughton, introduction to *The Uncanny*, by Freud, xxviii; and Haughton, introduction to *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*, by Haughton, ed., 1-32.

"The Uncanny", which deal with animism.[7] Freud advances the thought that an experience of the uncanny occurs in the return of primitive animism, previously thought to have been surmounted by the modern or civilised mind.[8] It is the idea of plants talking among themselves, perhaps also with human beings, which suggests their animism. Now the confirmation of this reality by science, evident in the Blaustein research, marks the point where we encounter what is properly understood as the vegetal uncanny. This vegetal uncanny symbolised by talking plants occurs in an encounter with primitive animism, leaving this same animism as *no longer* surmounted by the modern mind, and *no longer* regarded as primitive.

The vegetal uncanny is *anima mundi* for a post-Enlightenment world. This notion represents a scientific breakthrough as well as a significant development in the concept of the uncanny. An incorporation of the ideas of the uncanny in human thinking has long been acknowledged as a vital component of knowledge production, a way of taking "the strange" seriously, the better to understand its meaning. This is especially the case following Freud, as the "uncanny" of 1919 is seen as drawing together and concentrating many of his major concepts (such as repression, the unconscious, the Oedipus complex).[9] This complex space can then be seen as demarcating the threshold beyond which lies "the later Freud", with the composition of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a pathbreaking 1920 text, the beginnings of which are alluded to in the 1919 text. That Freud is growing in his thinking through this essay, itself structured like a plant, is in fact suggested by Hélène Cixous. Her description of the text identifies that it "[slides a few roots under the ground […] while it allows others to be lofted in the air", adding that "[w]hat in one instance appears a figure of science seems later to resemble some type of fiction".[10] This account of a vegetal Freud, centring on the uncanny, is altogether intriguing, and so we shall return later to science's uncanny interaction with fiction. For now, suffice it to say that Freud is not fully "vegetalized" in Cixous's reading of "*Das Unheimliche*"; nor, indeed, is there in Freud's essay any discussion of flowers (or of plant life more generally). Nevertheless, this same essay is a vital reference in considering the vegetal in its uncanniness, given what has just now been cited by Cixous about its structure and dynamic.

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[7] Freud, "The Uncanny." This translation of "*Das Unheimliche*" by David McLintock. references an earlier translation by James Strachey, but removes the inverted commas from within the title of Strachey's "The 'Uncanny'."
[8] Freud, "The Uncanny", 147, 155.
[9] See Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, for further discussion on psychoanalytic concepts converging in the space of the Freudian uncanny.
[10] Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms," 526.

Inventing new forms of *Unheimliche*

The importance of referring to Freud's 1919 text – an essay or "attempt" – as growing like a plant, into the ground and into the air, modally alternating between "science" and "fiction", is that its *form* as the very unity of structure and dynamic encourages us to take seriously this unusual ("nonsensical") notion of a talking plant. It signals the programmatics of a science not existing without fantasy. In so doing, it validates the subsidiary notion of fable *preceding* fact in rational understanding. This is the case if we see Freud's "The Uncanny" as amounting to, not so much a small scientific treatise, as "a strange theoretical novel".[11] Cixous, through her pursuit of the Freudian adventure in "The Uncanny", reaches an understanding of what makes *fiction* strange, namely its capacity for "the invention of *new* forms of *Unheimliche*".[12] Fiction is here located "at the extreme end of the uncanny", pointing to "what is newest in the new".[13] Positioned within the uncanny's spectrum in this way, pointing even towards the unknown (itself "[n]either real nor fictitious"), fiction is regarded as the uncanny's "double".[14] From this opening of a key theoretical aperture, an approach to the reality of pea plants communicating with one another gains in credibility. What may then be seen more clearly and grasped more firmly is pea plants "talking" about drought, as suggested by the Tiger-lily's description of hard and soft garden beds in Lewis Carroll; that is, in Carroll's "nonsense". Recall the "privileged place" assigned to Carroll in Deleuze's own *mise en scène* of sense's logic in its paradoxical structure.[15] In this instance, Carroll-the-storyteller can himself be seen as the "double" of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the logician and lecturer in mathematics. A passage through the Looking-glass now enacts the precondition of ourselves pursuing what has been termed the "vegetal turn" in the arts, in the sciences and, indeed, in their interdisciplinarity.

At this point, it is worth taking a closer look at Alice's exchanges with the Tiger-lily in the Garden of Live Flowers. What she herself brings to this encounter is especially significant. The exchanges at issue get underway with Alice alone in the Garden, not so much discovering the talking plants, as *inventing* them. "'O Tiger-lily,'" she says, "'I *wish* you could talk!'"[16] Here, there is an instance of, as Cixous might say, fiction inventing *new* forms of

[11] Cixous, 525.
[12] Cixous, 547.
[13] Cixous, 547.
[14] Cixous, 548.
[15] Deleuze, *Logic of* Sense, xi.
[16] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, 135; emphasis in original.

unheimliche, with the act of wishing carrying the thread of sense-making. Then, curiously, there is a dialogue with the Tiger-lily–turning into a larger conversation with a Rose, two Daisies, a Violet, and a Larkspur–where uncanniness itself appears more and more evident, *but not to Alice*. Why? Because it was Alice who first thought of the "live flowers", therefore their talkativeness does not appear strange to her. Moreover, if the talking flowers (not even the Rose which shouts at her) do not appear strange or uncanny to Alice, neither is she anxious about them. Crucially, she is disburdened of anxieties during her time in Wonderland, this condition being the basis for wonder in Wonderland itself.[17] Deleuze has observed something similar with his argument in *Logic of Sense* that "[t]he loss of the proper name is the adventure which is repeated throughout all Alice's adventures". [18] In connection with this focalisation of a certain "impropriety", let us recall how a basic notion of anxiety as a component of the uncanny had first led Freud into composition of his "uncanny" essay (a metaphor of itself by its procedure), seeking to push back knowledge boundaries. It is the look at Alice in her un-anxious state, while among talking flowers, which here provides access to the notion of an anxiety-laden uncanny. This approach brings more fully into view, not so much "the uncanny", as the vegetal uncanny.

The Uncanny and Anxiety

As regards a general understanding of anxiety, it is a state often understood as having neither an obvious cause, nor an evident end, nor a tell-tale *telos*. It is without object. But there is nothing in this understanding with which to engage anxiety's intricate intertwinement with the uncanny. However, in Jacques Lacan's 1962-63 seminar on *l'angoisse* ("anxiety", "fear", "anguish", and "angst"), he does speak in the same breath, as it were, about anxiety and Freud's "*Das Unheimliche*": he broaches the former with the latter (just as he had broached the unconscious with Freud's *Witz*). The result is a direct reversal of a received understanding of anxiety as being without an object. Howsoever that may be, Jacques Lacan's approach can still be seen as consistent with his "return to Freud", at the same time as contributing to what is known about the uncanny. Critical in this regard is the underlying sense that

[17] An astute reading of the space of Alice's Wonderland as an anxiety-free zone was adapted by Damon Albarn and Moira Buffini into a musical, entitled *Wonder.land*, Palace Theatre, Manchester, UK, July 2, 2015, as part of the 150th anniversary of *Alice in Wonderland*. In this version, the protagonist Alison, instead of disappearing down a rabbit-hole, goes online to escape the bullying she has experienced at school. For commentary, see Gary Farnell, "Anniversary Alice", 38-40.
[18] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 3.

the "true substance" of anxiety is, as Lacan says, "*that which deceives not*".[19] This lack of deceptiveness about anxiety's substance is due to anxiety and the uncanny beginning together in a situation where, to quote Lacan again, "lack happens to be lacking".[20]

What indeed is properly Freudian about this critical lack-of-a-lack consists in its correlation with a key formulation in the text of Freud's "The Uncanny". At the point when his focus is sharpest on animism, with a co-existent anxiety, "an uncanny effect often arises", Freud says, "when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes".[21] Whereas in Lacan "lack happens to be lacking" at the onset of coeval states of anxiety and uncanniness, this equates with, in Freud, a symbol becoming "full". Both these thinkers are especially acute in conveying what is, often, at once immediate and shocking about unnerving uncanny experiences. Think, perhaps, of a mute plant becoming talkative as an illustration of what is formulated here. Or consider finding oneself in a garden full of talking flowers. Carrollian nonsense, it could be said, is a construction of what Freud will come to say, as referred to, about a symbol taking on "the full function and significance of what it symbolizes", when the boundary between fantasy and reality is "blurred", and we face the "reality" of something until now considered "imaginary".[22]

This understanding of anxiety, where a Lacanian "lack happens to be lacking" due to the uncanniness of a Freudian symbol becoming "full", is what gets pressed into relief by Alice, the remarkably *un*-anxious Alice, in Wonderland. This is a situation in which there is a pronounced vegetal dimension, centring as it does on the muteness of flowers. In Carroll's narrative it is mute flowers that lack speech which are altered into a state of full symbolic agency in the uncanny moment of their entering into a conversation with Alice. Perhaps most crucial of all, it is only Alice who can make this altering happen, her own lack, ironically of anxiety itself, being the prerequisite for her adventures in Wonderland, from moment to moment a pioneering exploration of the uncanny. To be clear, there is nothing naïve about wonder as associated with Alice. Rather, she embodies an exemplary attitude towards the unknown: she is, in a phrase, our heroine of the vegetal uncanny. That Alice is drawn heroically by Carroll is, indeed, something which is established from the outset in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Recall the

[19] Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 76; emphasis in original.
[20] Lacan, 42.
[21] Freud, "The Uncanny," 150.
[22] Freud, 150.

first of her adventures after passing through the looking-glass in Looking-glass House, namely her encounter with that celebrated monster of nonsense, the Jabberwock. The adventure begins with her managing to read an "unreadable" poem. That is, she puzzles over, but eventually grasps that it is necessary to hold the writing up to the mirror to render the script legible, then discovers the Jabberwock in the poem's content (in a moment in keeping with the Freudian *blurring* of fantasy and reality). Here, the monstrous Jabberwock appears as a metaphor for the difficulty of the "nonsense" poem "Jabberwocky", a metaphor, in other words, for difficulty in any situation which seems senseless. Once more Alice is disorientated but overcomes this perplexity again. She is ultimately undeterred by the poem, actively making sense of it as a narrative form about the slaying of a dragon-like creature. Alice's "heroism", in this regard, is duly amplified by Carroll's illustrator Sir John Tenniel, portraying Alice herself as a sword-bearing slayer of the Jabberwock-dragon, reminiscent even of a Pre-Raphaelite knight. Here, of course, our Pre-Raphaelite Alice, emblematic of pre-modern canons of learning, is bearing the proverbial Sword of Truth.

It is, in short, an image of what can be accomplished in the face of adversity, in pursuit of sense amid apparent nonsense. What encapsulates Alice's achievement is her response to the defeat of the Jabberwock. "'But oh!' thought Alice, suddenly jumping up, 'if I don't make haste, I shall have to go back through the Looking-glass, before I've seen what the rest of the house is like! Let's have a look at the garden first!'"[23] This impulse of "[l]et's have a look at the garden first!" is what prompts Alice's adventures and, in the second chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass*, takes her into the Garden of Live Flowers, whereupon she has the fateful encounter with the vegetal uncanny. In this way, the narrative action of Carroll's story centring on Alice as a heroically un-anxious protagonist, presents itself as a parable of *canny* enquiry in the field of the unknown. It tells a tale, one might suggest, akin to Freud's "Uncanny" as precisely that weird, difficult-to-place theoretical fiction about a thing as strangely unknown about *the uncanny itself* as the vegetal uncanny.

Alice's Wish: A Genealogy of the Uncanny

"Be careful what you wish for" is a well-known expression that is, in part, a form of discouragement, somewhat laden with an anxiety of wishing itself. It is so fraught with ambivalence: it carries the suggestion that one's anxiety might be made greater, rather than lessened, through the wished-for thing

[23] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, 134.

coming into actual existence. It is via this thought that we return to Lacan's Freudian understanding of anxiety, wherein "lack happens to be lacking". Or indeed, following Lacan, Renata Salecl has formulated an account of the consumerist uncanny, in which it is noted how an uncanny sensation arises *and anxiety begins* when shoppers are, as the saying goes, "spoilt for choice".[24] Insofar as desire-as-lack regulates "normal" behaviour, having too much of something may be problematic as Salecl suggests, conjuring as she does a veritable Wonderland of the typical phantasmagoria that is the modern shopping experience. Or putting it differently, the other side of the ambivalence in "be careful what you wish for" is revealed by Alice's wish, in her solitude, that the Tiger-lily, waving gracefully in the wind, might talk to her. When the wish comes true, Alice is not so much "spoilt for choice" as confronted by what will later become the scientific discovery of plant communication. She paves the way, in effect, for the arrival of that moment in uncanny logic (in Carrollian "nonsense") when primitive animism becomes that which is *no longer* surmounted by the modern mind, *no longer* regarded as primitive. This "primitive", rather, is merely the modern in a state of distant, dislocated, disarticulated pre-formation or pre-sublimation or pre-apotheosis. There is in the end a specific reconfiguration of the experience of uncanny anxiety, representing a landmark in the genealogy of the uncanny as a concept. Alice-the-adventurous, *uncannily* un-anxious as well as *cannily* heroic, points to the remarkable vicissitudes of this concept's development from its Enlightenment origins down to Freud and, indeed, down to Terry Castle's more recent eighteenth-century research on the historical invention of the uncanny.[25]

Sketching the uncanny's conceptual shifts and contortions is where Freud begins in his 1919 essay. However, if his scholarly review of the "existing literature" looks predictable at the level of its protocols, Freud's essay in its adventurousness quickly overtakes itself, becoming, as Anneleen Masschelein has suggested, "a model for another type of knowledge operating in the margin of a more general theory governed by ambivalence, uncertainty, repetition, haunting, and fiction".[26] Thus the question arises, as is posed by Masschelein herself, whether "the uncanny" is in fact any longer a *concept*. That the "*unheimliche*" in Freud's text is translatable as "eerie" and "creepy", as well as "uncanny" (without forgetting "unhomely") indicates the play in this word's meaning, constituting what can be seen as a concomitant problem-

[24] Salecl, *Choice,* 14; see also Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Ideology after the Fall of Socialism*; and Salecl, *On Anxiety*.
[25] Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, 6-9.
[26] Masschelein, *The Unconcept,* 156.