



Reconsidering Freud's Uncanny: The Coppola Perspective

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Abstract: This essay reconsiders the Freudian notion of the Uncanny/Unheimlich by focusing on the attempt of the ego to project and maintain a coherent and consistent view of the world and of itself—an attempt that is intrinsically subverted by the very process of repetition that both conditions and disrupts all forms of identity and of identification.

Keywords: Uncanny/Unheimlich; anxiety; projection; signification; repetition

1. Making Yourself at Home

It will hopefully not seem out of place to begin this reconsideration of Freud's Uncanny with a personal reminiscence. I have been thinking about and working on this topic almost since I began to teach and do research, which as you can imagine is a very long time—indeed almost a lifetime. Of course, this has not been a continual effort on my part, fortunately. Rather it consists of fairly widely spaced episodes, in which after a time working on other projects I tend to come back to the Uncanny—or rather it tends to come back to me, invited or not—usually however in a somewhat different light than previously. This difference reflects both changes in the world, to which the Uncanny inevitably refers, as well as changes in my perspective on it—changes that have occurred over many decades and over many different geographical venues. The word “perspective” is going to turn out to play an important role in my reconsideration of the Uncanny, since the Uncanny, far from being a self-contained object or entity, is in fact largely constituted by the situation in which it is encountered. Needless to say, this situation and perspective changes over the years. Change is an important factor in the experience of the Uncanny, which means that its temporal and perhaps historical dimension plays a decisive part in its experience. To anticipate, I will propose that what is called the Uncanny thus involves an affective experience, one that entails feelings as much as knowledge, and thus involves an experience that I would describe as being *strangely subjective*. It is strangely subjective insofar as the subject it involves is not the familiar autonomous or sovereign individual that is often construed as the author of its actions—the grammatical subject for instance, that gives unity and direction to a movement of predication—but rather someone who is subjected to the Uncanny as that which turns out to be strangely familiar, or familiarly strange. The emphasis here should be on the interesting English expression, “turns out”, since as we will see, descriptions of Uncanny encounters generally involve not just change but a turn that occurs abruptly, if it occurs at all. At any rate, the Uncanny seems generally to involve a moment of unexpected discovery, although what is discovered *turns out* to have *been there all the time*.

There—but where is this “there”? Where exactly is the Uncanny to be found, and under what conditions? Is it a universally human experience, or is it specific to one or another cultural tradition and therefore not simply an anthropological given? One compelling reason why such a question has to be asked relates to the way what is called in English “Uncanny” is in fact a translation from the German, where, however, the word has very different connotations. The German word is *Unheimlich*. In both languages it takes the form of an adjective or adverb, even if in such discussions as this one it is treated as though



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it were a noun. But what it names is already tied to its adjectival-adverbial form, which means it does not simply designate an object that could be regarded as self-contained. It thus involves not so much the property of an object as a relation to a situation, or as I have already mentioned, an *experience*. The Uncanny is experienced through an encounter in which what is strange turns out to be familiar, while at the same time marking the familiar as also strange. In other words, strangeness does not exclude familiarity, as one might normally expect, but familiarity also does not exclude strangeness. The two turn out to coexist in and as the Uncanny. In many other languages, the rendering of *Unheimlich* seems almost more distant than in English. But for the moment, let us focus on the relation of the English word to the German. Uncanny and *Unheimlich* are two words with very different semantic fields. The root of the English word, “canny”, which is not widely used today, at least in American English, is said to derive from the Scottish word, canny, which was used to designate a particular form of intelligence, implying cleverness or shrewdness. Thus, it involves a certain form of practical knowledge, which the prefix “un-” then tends to negate. But as we shall see, the negation signified by the prefix un- is very different from a simple negation, such as that which could be associated with the prefix “non-”: the Uncanny is not simply the opposite of the canny but rather one of its forms. It entails a form of ruse, the use of the mind to overcome obstacles. This at least is why Freud preferred this translation of *Unheimlich* to other possibilities, such as bizarre, weird, eerie, etc. I also note that none of these possible words retain the adverbial quality of *Unheimlich*, through which it is understood as *part of a process* rather than as a property of an object. It suggests a form of canniness, and not simply its absence. And although the English word implies a kind of intelligence, confronting obstacles, what surely appealed to Freud was the fact that this intelligence was not necessarily available to the normal self-conscious mind.

Freud once reported that one of the best confirmations of an interpretation in the situation of an analysis was when one of his patients acknowledged that she knew it all the time; she “just didn’t want to think of it”. (Freud and Breuer 1970). That is as good a one-line description of what Freud calls the unconscious as you are liable to find: it is a form of knowledge, but one that is generally inaccessible to our voluntary self-consciousness. The Uncanny is not simply unconscious, especially since it involves a feeling, which Freud insists can never be unconscious: we are aware of it. But our awareness of this feeling is never simply reducible to knowledge of an object. Our feeling is one of recognition without our fully knowing what exactly we are recognizing. It involves what I would call a recognition of the *strangely familiar*. The sense of surprise relates to the way what seems strange also strikes us as familiar, while at the same time rendering the familiar strange. The convergence of familiar and strange in the experience of the Uncanny challenges the (predominantly Western?) logic of identity, by demonstrating that something can indeed be both itself and its opposite at the same time and *in the same place*.¹

If the Uncanny through its convergence of opposites thereby calls into question the notion of *place*, this is even more explicit in the German word, *Unheimlich*, whose primary root is related not to intelligence but to a place, and indeed to a very specific one, namely the home: in German, *Heim*. *Un-heimlich* thus designates something that is, in the first instance, not at home. But this does not mean that it is away from home, in exile as it were. Or if so, then this exile takes place in and as the home itself. Which means that the notion of home no longer has a unified self. As already discussed in relation to the un-canny, the un- in *Unheimlich* does not simply negate the home or pose itself as an alternative to it but rather as a form of it. The *Unheimlich* involves the discovery that one is not at home in the home. But this in turn raises the question: What is a home? I believe that there is no simple response to this question—in part because the significance of the notion of home varies from culture to culture, from language to language.

2. “La Séance Continue”

Probably none of Freud’s other writings demonstrate more clearly than “The Uncanny” how little the author is “at home” in relation to his subject. Freud begins the essay with a

series of disclaimers, of which the most important are first, his statement that the Uncanny is not really at home in the domain that psychoanalysis usually addresses, but is rather an aesthetic phenomenon; and second, that he himself has had little recent experience of the feelings associated with the Unheimlich. Both of these disclaimers raise the question of just why Freud feels himself compelled to write and publish on this particular topic, especially given the author's lack of first-hand experience. In short, the essay begins by raising the question of the author's perspective. It is a question that the essay never really answers, although precisely the motif of perspective will return frequently—one might even say uncannily—throughout the essay, and in particular will contribute substantially to its conclusion.

Just how ambiguous Freud's relation to the Uncanny really was can be glimpsed in a fact concerning the manner in which the essay was written. According to his first biographer, friend and student, Ernest Jones, Freud began working on this essay long before he actually published it. One possible reason for this interruption can be found in the text itself. In it, Freud discusses how "unintended repetitions" can produce an Uncanny effect:

In another set of experiences we have no difficulty in recognizing that it is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something Uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable. [...] But the impression [of harmlessness] changes if one [...] encounters the number 62 several times in one day. [...] Anyone who is not steeled against the lure of superstition will be inclined to accord a secret significance to the persistent recurrence of this one number—to see it, for instance, as a pointer to his allotted life-span. (Freud 2003)

Freud never tired of insisting that one's choice of examples was rarely insignificant or arbitrary, and his choice here of the number 62 to illustrate an Uncanny recurrence is, according to Jones, hardly accidental. Jones reports that Freud was long obsessed with the thought that he would die at the age of 62; and so, the fact that he interrupted work on the essay until he just passed that age before returning to finish it, certainly suggests that the number 62 was taken from his own, recent experience. This, as well as at least one further anecdote given in the text, to which we will return, indicate that experience of the Uncanny was not at all as foreign to Freud as he initially suggests. Why then does he make a point of emphasizing a distance that did not exist? And why does he write and publish the essay at all?

Two phrases that he uses in the passage quoted can provide at least a partial response. First, his emphasis that it is not simply the phenomenon of recurrence or repetition that is Uncanny, but the fact that it is "unintended". And second, that in the particular example given, the number serves as "a pointer to his allotted life-span". The recurrence is "unintended" by the person to whom it recurs, and at the same time it indicates another intention in the phrase "allotted lifespan". In short, what is Uncanny or Unheimlich involves the limitation of self-conscious intention, planning or control at the same time that the repetition imposes "the idea of the fateful and the inescapable". In short, what is Uncanny is the idea of an intention that limits the life of what it intends. Or put differently, Uncanny here is the recognition of an intention that produces what must be described as involuntary effects. Intention here implies some sort of intelligence, but one that is experienced as beyond the conscious control of finite, mortal living beings.

Formulated in this way, we see that such involuntary recurrence is a variation of a motif that Freud identifies as profoundly related to the Uncanny—that of the double. Quoting Otto Rank's study, Freud notes that although the *double* may initially have served to protect against the vulnerabilities of being *single*, it gradually came to embody the very danger it sought to overcome. In this context, both Freud and Rank are picking up a tradition that goes back at least to Plato. In the dialogue, the Cratylus, Socrates addresses the following question to Cratylus: suppose, he asks, that

Socrates. Some god [...] made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus?

Cratylus. It seems to me, Socrates, that there would be two Cratyluses. (Plato 1998)

What, however, neither Socrates nor Freud makes explicit is the fact that repetition or replication not only does not subvene upon an already existing identity—here Cratylus—but that it is indispensable in constituting identity as a relation in which sameness prevails over difference. By contrast, the great insight of Derrida in formulating his notion of “iterability” was that it is *only through repetition* that anything can be identified as that which it is. Put differently: self-identity is only at home in and through a process of repetition, which however alienates it from its self-sameness.

It is this structural dependence of identity upon repetition and difference that defines and limits—*delimits*—the power of the reflexive I to be purely and simply itself, at least in the sense of an autonomous and sovereign subject. In light of this structural delimitation it is worth remarking how the supposition of a governing, purposeful intention or intelligence can serve as a means of mitigating the ambiguity. When Freud associates “the idea of the fateful” with that of “the inescapable” in describing the Uncanny effect of a repetition or a recurrence that seems to have no discernible source or purpose, he implicitly appeals to an intelligent purpose, a goal-informed activity, guiding the recurrence. The latter is no longer simply a result of chance but of design. In other words, the notion of the “inescapable” is no longer simply arbitrary but necessary. This speculative construction thus tends to reestablish theoretically the control that is lost at the level of the practical I. Elsewhere, I have argued that this may be another reason for Freud’s writing this essay: namely, through a theory of the Uncanny to bring the anxiety it produces in practice retroactively under partial control—by assimilating it to the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis.²

Another instance of an Uncanny experience that belies Freud’s assertion that he has long since not had any such experiences involves this time not the involuntary recurrence of the same but the misrecognition of what should have been familiar. In the following long footnote, he compares a personal experience with one recounted by Ernst Mach:

I was sitting alone in my wagon-lit compartment when a more than usually violent jerk of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and a traveling cap came in. I assume that he had been about to leave the washing cabinet which divides the two compartments, and had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. (Freud 1925)

Freud comments this anecdote by observing that his “dislike” of his unrecognized mirror image was perhaps “a vestigial trace of that older reaction which feels the double to be something Uncanny” (ibid.). But he does not go into further detail. What links this anecdote to his unavowed relation to the number 62 is that both are related to his mortality: the number because of his fear that it would mark the year of his death; and the unrecognized mirror image because it displays the process of his growing old (“an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and a traveling cap came in”). The “dressing gown” and “traveling cap” could in this context easily suggest the final voyage and a sleep from which there is no awakening: “I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance”.

We begin to glimpse a possible explanation for why Freud tries to assert and to keep a certain distance from this particular subject-matter in his essay. If the Uncanny turns out to be difficult to define in purely objective terms, it is perhaps because, as Freud will finally come to conclude, it is all a question of *perspective*. It is never the occurrence itself, in isolation, that is Uncanny, but always the way it relates to the perceiver, revealing his or her

singularity and mortality. Freud implies as much in a passage he cites from Otto Rank's study of the double:

The double was originally an insurance against destruction of the ego an "energetic denial of the power of death". [...] When this stage has been left behind, the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality it becomes the ghastly harbinger of death. (Freud 1925, p. 9)

No wonder Freud, when confronted with his image on the train, did not want to recognize the "ghastly" image of an ageing self. But as his reference to Ernst Mach suggests, this extremely singular experience is also one that is widely shared. Freud may have been alone with his mirror image in that train compartment, but retroactively he might have realized he was in good company. A company that did not negate the fear of separation, but that supplemented it.

In writing about the Uncanny, he could not avoid revealing how intimately he was acquainted with it—even as he denied that intimate knowledge and sought to distance himself from it precisely by seeking to objectify it—and thereby to appropriate it as an object of psychoanalytical theory. This required treating it as a subset of anxiety, which in turn Freud continually tried to subsume and explain in terms of his "pleasure principle". And yet even as he was moving "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", at about the same time he completed and published "The Uncanny", he was becoming aware that his previous attempt to assimilate anxiety to that "principle" was unsatisfying—precisely because what was involved was not simply an object but a perspective. And such a perspective implied a relation in which distance and contact no longer excluded one another. For the perspective that was involved in the Uncanny, through which the strange revealed itself to be familiar and the familiar strange, entailed precisely a relation that was as impossible to objectify as was the Uncanny itself, namely the relation to death.

Throughout his essay on "The Uncanny", and as we will see shortly, elsewhere as well, Freud insists that the fear of death cannot explain or account for the Uncanny, despite his acknowledging that "to many people the acme of the Uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts". (Freud 1925, p. 148) And as we have seen, many of the examples he gives—above all that of the double and of involuntary recurrence—tend to confirm this relation. Nevertheless, Freud emphatically rejects this as an adequate psychoanalytic explanation of the Uncanny, since "our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality" (Freud 1925). In short, because our own death is strictly considered unimaginable—since as soon as we imagine it we are placing ourselves in a position of a survivor and a spectator³—a psychoanalytically consistent account of the Uncanny must decouple it from the anxiety of mortality. If anxiety, of which the Uncanny is a form, is considered to be a result of repression, there must be some *thing* to repress, i.e., a mental representation or memory. However, as Freud insists—in a way not entirely unrelated to Heidegger, whom of course he never read—one's own death is not as such memorable or representable, since all representation presupposes a certain distance from what is to be represented. From this perspective, representation as a form of doubling entails, structurally as it were and independently of its content, an "energetic denial of the power of death". In his essay on "The I and the It" (aka "The Ego and the Id"), written in 1923, just a few years after "The Uncanny", Freud elaborates on his conviction that psychoanalytically the fear of death cannot be regarded as a primary factor but must be derived from actual and remembered experiences.

The high-sounding phrase, 'every fear is ultimately the fear of death', has hardly any meaning, and at any rate can hardly be justified. It seems to me, on the contrary, perfectly correct to distinguish the fear of death from a dream of an object (realistic anxiety) and from neurotic libidinal anxiety. It presents a difficult problem for psychoanalysis, for death is an abstract concept with a negative content for which no unconscious correlative can be found.⁴

Death—one's own that is—cannot as such be represented and hence can have, as Freud thought, no "unconscious correlative", since it cannot become an object of repression.

On the other hand, even if death is considered to be “an abstract concept with at best a negative content”, that content still relates to what is representable, and hence repressible, by negating it: it is related to a not-this or a not-that, and therefore is not simply nothing at all. But from what then is the fear of death derived?

Here, Freud has at least a partial response: the fear of death is related to the function of the I (or ego), which he has long considered to be “the seat (or site—SW) of anxiety”. Anxiety, Freud argues, must always be understood as a response of the I to a danger. What that danger may be “cannot be specified” but “we know that the fear is of being overwhelmed or annihilated”. I note in passing that Freud uses the same German word here as Heidegger will employ a decade later in his discussion of the Uncanny, in his 1936 lectures on “The Introduction into Metaphysics”.⁵ One difference between the uses of this word between the two thinkers is that Freud emphasizes that it is the I that is “overwhelmed” (in German: *überwältigt*), whereas for Heidegger it is not just the I but human being in general that is so affected. This generalization will come back to haunt him, uncannily it can be argued, when he returns and revises his discussion of the Uncanny in his 1942 lectures on Hölderlin’s poem, “Der Ister” (Greek name for the Danube).⁶ I have begun to discuss this revision elsewhere and I hope to be able to elaborate it more fully since it bears on the question of perspective, that is so central for Freud’s discussion as well.⁷

For Freud, by contrast, it is never human being as such that is the condition of the Uncanny, and in particular of the “difficult problem” of its relation to death and to anxiety, but rather primarily that part of the human psyche that is organized as a reflexive first person singular, an I. Thus, Freud begins by first considering how the ego responds to what he calls “internal processes”, and then extends his analysis to what he calls “external danger”:

We know that the fear of death makes its appearance under two conditions [. . .] namely, as a reaction to an external danger and as an internal process, as for instance in melancholia. Once again a neurotic manifestation may help us to understand a normal one. [. . .] In melancholia the ego gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the super-ego, instead of loved. To the ego, therefore, living means the same as being loved [. . .] The super-ego fulfills the same function of protecting and saving that was fulfilled in earlier days by the father and later by Providence or Destiny. But when the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it is bound to draw the same conclusion. It sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die.⁸ (my italics—SW)

The fear of death, then, according to Freud, is radically different from what appears to be its object, “death”, since this particular ‘object’ cannot be experienced as such but only indirectly. The experience that produces anxiety in general and the fear of death in particular must therefore be understood—so Freud—to be based on the memory or repetition of earlier experiences, which include “the first great anxiety-state”, namely “birth”, but which ultimately involve the feeling of “separation” from the protective instance, usually the mother. Fear of death he thus considers to be an emotional experience derived from separation anxiety, and this in turn is anxiogenic insofar as it is associated with the inability of the ego to protect itself. Anxiety thus derives from the inability of the I to avoid separation and the loss of protection.

But let us stop for a moment to ask what precisely this “loss of protection” entails? Most simply it implies a certain dissymmetry in a relation of power. There must be a need to be protected, and a belief in the possibility of protection, which signifies a sensed lack of power. The I thus perceives itself as lacking or having lost the resources required to prevent the rise of tensions. But simultaneously the I searches for a source that can help it to meet the challenge it itself is unable to. If it does not find that source of protection, it can be tempted—as Freud puts it—to “give itself up”, i.e., ultimately to cease to exist.

But what is it exactly that the ego is seeking to protect? Here, we come upon a rather striking assertion of Freud, namely that “to the ego [. . .] living means the same as being loved”. In other words, the ego is seeking to protect itself as an object of love, which in turn here turns out to be synonymous with an object of protection—whether for the super-ego or for the ego itself. Given that the defining purpose of the ego, as Freud never tires of stressing, is to assure a high degree of organization and coherence for the psyche, it turns out that the major form that fulfills this function is none other than that of the *object* itself, and this is independent of its content. In his text on *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud is thus able to suggest, in a chapter entitled “Supplementary Remarks on Anxiety”, that the exemplary “danger” for the ego and thus the ultimate source of all anxiety is nothing other than the loss of the object as such, “the object being a protection against every situation of helplessness” (Freud 1969).

The notion of “object” thus emerges as the external correlative of that sense of wholeness and organic completeness that the I, as Freud interprets it, seeks to “protect”. What the I thus seeks to safeguard is its sense of being the self-same, which means not changing so radically that its consistency could be called into question. Insofar as this sense of self is tied to the feeling of being an object of love, a minimal distance and difference has to be assumed between the source of the love and its object. This minimal distance of difference defines the irreducible space of the Uncanny, since the sense of self-sameness presupposes a being-loved by something or someone that is irreducibly other. No theory of “narcissism” or self-love can entirely eliminate this alterity. It is embedded, as it were, in the *ob-*of the object.

This is tantamount to suggesting that the notion of a “loss of object” must be understood not as something that supervenes upon an object that was initially possessed, but rather as something that is determined by the objective nature of the object itself. It is only because of this minimal distance that the object can appear to be “a protection against every situation of helplessness;” but it is also this minimal distance that prevents the object from being a fully effective protection, since what it is called upon to protect turns out to be a condition of its own objectality.⁹

Although Freud does not fully explore the ambiguous implications of his notion of the object as a source of protection and as a response to the sense of helplessness, he does implicitly invoke that ambiguity by insisting that the ultimate source of anxiety, at least as far as it affects the Uncanny, is not death, given its lack of a tangible object, but rather the projected loss of a bodily organ: “These considerations make it possible to regard the fear of death, like the fear of conscience, as a development of the fear of castration”. (Freud 1969, pp. 61–62). *It is in part in order to thus domesticate anxiety by subordinating the fear of death to the fear of castration—and thus to integrate it into the structure of psychoanalytic theory—that Freud writes his essay on the Uncanny.*

3. Castration: A Narrative Perspective

Freud thus turns to the Uncanny in order to demonstrate how the fear of death and anxiety more generally derive from the specific form of anxiety that Freud’s theory tended to privilege over all others: castration anxiety. This theory was important to Freud inasmuch as it seemed to provide a synthesis of the two perspectives from which he approached mental behavior: the *genetic* perspective, retracing the chronological development of the individual, emphasizing the importance of early childhood experiences; and the *structural* perspective, which interpreted the psyche in terms of its developmental response to infantile helplessness and the ensuing desire for “protection”. Starting from the experience of the male child—obviously not an innocent move, to whose consequences we will return—Freud describes the traumatic moment when the child has to confront the anatomical difference between the sexes:

In the course of these investigations, the child makes the discovery that the penis is not one of the possessions common to all creatures who are like himself. The accidental sight of the genitals of a little sister or a little playmate is the occasion

of this. [...] We know how they react to their first perception of the absence of the penis. They deny its absence, and believe they do see the penis all the same; the discrepancy between what they see and what they imagine is glossed over by the idea that the penis is still small and will grow; gradually they come to the conclusion, so fraught with emotion, that at least it had been there and had at some time been taken away. *The absence of the penis is thought to be the result of a castration*, and then the child is faced with the task of dealing with the thought of a castration in relation to himself. (Freud 1923a) [my italics—SW]

As Freud describes it, the notion of castration is a narrative phantasy devised by the child, especially the male child, not simply to explain “the absence of the penis” but rather to *deny* the anatomical sexual difference. *This resort to narrative demonstrates one of its major functions from a Freudian perspective, namely to transform difference into an opposition, which in turn presupposes a self-identity preexisting all differential relationships.*¹⁰ “Castration” thus serves to name not an object or an event but an effort to retain the belief in the priority of sameness over difference, via the conviction in the original ubiquity of the male organ; what is in fact a perception not of an object but of a part of a differential relationship is thus treated as though it were the negative manifestation of a self-identical object, the phallus.

What Freud calls castration is thus an exemplary instance of the eruption of the Uncanny, but it is not its sole or exclusive cause. Rather this seems to be the effort to deny differential relationships, which then return as the excess or default of the resulting identification. Familiarity based on the denial of difference leaves traces that can no longer be easily assimilated. Which is to say, *in their familiarity these traces remain strange*. And when they occur through the language of literature, their strangeness takes on a distinctive significance. As a literary phenomenon—and although Freud begins by calling the Uncanny an “aesthetic” phenomenon, in his essay it becomes quickly clear that by aesthetic he really means literary—the Uncanny becomes *strangely significant*. That is, words signify beyond the conventional meanings that have hitherto made them seem simply familiar. These strange or curious *significations* are no longer entirely at home as familiar *meanings*.¹¹ They are not at home in this way insofar as the Uncanny is revealed through Freud’s reading of texts to be not so much an object or an event as a function of *perspective*. The perspective that is involved here entails not what one might expect—a visual experience—as a linguistic one. It is the conventional familiarity of words and names that reveal themselves to be strange, which constitutes the specifically literary dimension of the Uncanny. One is no longer entirely at home in language—this is perhaps the Uncanny experience par excellence. Let us look at two points in Freud’s reading of Hoffmann’s “Sandman” to discover this perspective at work.

The story, although well known to students and readers of German literature, has become famous beyond that limited group through the subplot of a female figure called Olympia, in whom the initial narrator and protagonist of the story, Nathanael, falls madly in love only to discover that she is in reality an automaton, a robot, the joint product of a professor and an optician, Professor Spallanzani and Signor Coppola. The scene of Nathanael’s discovery of the inanimate nature of his beloved Olympia provided material both for two popular 19th century musical spectacles, Léo Delibes’ ballet, “Coppélia”—in which Olympia takes on the name of one of her two creators—and Jacques Offenbach’s opera, “Tales of Hoffmann”. However, in Freud’s reading of the original Hoffmann story, Nathanael’s love for Olympia plays little or no role, since Freud argues, persuasively, that the Uncanny effect of the story is related more to its beginning and tragic end, than to the episode with Olympia. Here are a few elements from Freud’s summary of the first part of the story:

A student named Nathanael . . . is unable . . . to banish certain memories connected with the mysterious and terrifying death of his much-loved father. [...] One evening . . . Nathanael hides in his father’s study. He recognizes the visitor as a lawyer named Coppelius . . . who occasionally came to lunch. He now identifies Coppelius with the dreaded Sandman. [...] A year later, during another visit by

the Sandman, the father is killed by an explosion . . . and the lawyer Coppelius disappears from the town without a trace. (Gaiman 2023, pp. 136–37)

This passage covers only the first part of the story, which in contrast to the second, tragic half is related in the first person by Nathanael in letters he writes. Freud points out the association of the Sandman with the anxiety of losing one's eyes and its relation to corporeal dismemberment. This is even more prominent in Hoffmann's story than the short resumé just quoted indicates.

In the actual story, when Coppelius discovers Nathanael hiding, he not only threatens to rip out his eyes but he also disassembles his body before then deciding to put it together again. Thus, the fear of losing one's eyes is in Hoffmann's tale linked to the more general depiction of physical dismemberment. This in turn provides at least a partial justification for Freud's main point, which is to interpret the anxiety of losing one's eyes in the story as a stand-in for the symbolically even more significant castration anxiety—which is more significant insofar as it is grounded both in the sense of underlying incompleteness and vulnerability of the male body and in the desire to take the place of the idealized father in order to overcome that sense of helplessness.

The scene that leads up to Nathanael's discovery of who the Sandman really is, in a certain sense, the literary correlative of the castration complex understood as a narrative that denies difference in order to affirm the universality and self-identity of the phallus. Nevertheless, in Hoffmann's story there are some details that Freud entirely ignores. One is the fact that Nathanael identifies the Sandman as a lawyer named Coppelius, and who is apparently a friend of the family, or at least of the father, since he "occasionally comes to lunch". The fact that the Sandman is identified as a lawyer—a fact that apparently plays no further role in the narrative—is in its isolation all the more significant. The question is what does it signify? Or rather, *how does it signify?*

In literature, the question of how things signify is generally more telling than what they signify. In Hoffmann's story, the lawyer's appearance at the family lunch table is described as repulsively animalistic, above all, as hirsute—and also as threateningly feline.¹² With his hairy hands, he insists on touching the children at the lunch table. In this context, we may want to remember that the only visible sign of the female genitals that the child encounters on its way to "castration" (or for the little girl, to "penis-envy") is related to pubic hair—hair that from the perspective of the castration-narrative is interpreted as covering or concealing a non-entity, a lack or a darkness if you will, which Freud in his essay also notes is a trait frequently associated with the Uncanny.¹³ We will have occasion to return to this opposition of obscurity and brilliance a bit later, when we discuss Nathanael's troubled relation to his childhood girlfriend, who not by accident goes by the luminous name of Clara.

But for now, the Uncanny moment that I want to point out is one that passes entirely unseen or rather unheard by Freud (and as far I know by everyone else). Above all, it has become invisible or rather illegible in the process of translation. This is not the fault of translators since this particular incident can be said to be truly untranslatable. It involves an experience of language that resists translation insofar as it is linked to the *material of the German signifiers* used by Hoffmann: a materiality that is both acoustic as well as graphic. In it, a certain materiality of sound is repeated as almost the same and yet slightly different—and in this sameness and difference the repetition resists simple translation, while at the same time multiplying its significance through this acoustical and graphical convergence. We should keep in mind how important non-visual experience is for Nathanael's encounter with the Sandman, who at first is nothing more than a name for him, but who gradually imposes himself through acoustical and tactile manifestation: the sound of steps mounting the stairs and later the memory of the lawyer Coppelius touching him with his hirsute hands. This hair also frames the eyes as their "bushy eyebrows"—a singular trait that will reoccur uncannily toward the end of the story when Coppelius makes his final return. But the idea that hair frames and in a sense incorporates the eyes and the visual sense adds a supplementary dimension to the critique of the object that is at the basis of Freud's

“castration complex”. The complex includes the strands of hair that fail to coalesce into a unified, recognizable object.¹⁴

Having visually identified the dreaded Sandman as “the lawyer, Coppelius, who sometimes eats with us at noon”, Nathanael—who is recounting his memory in a letter to his friend, Lothar—translates his visual discovery into the following declarative exclamation, which I will cite first in English and then in German:

The Sandman, the horrible Sandman, *is* the old lawyer, Coppelius, who sometimes *eats* with us at noon.

Der Sandmann, der fürchterliche Sandmann *ist* der alte Advocat Coppelius, der manchmal bei uns zu Mittag *ißt*. (my italics—SW)

Nathanael repeats the generic name, Sandman, a repetition that emphasizes his own affective relation—his engaged perspective one could say—to the Sandman, the horrible Sandman—before he then goes on to remember and to identify just who this horrible Sandman really *is*. And this identification, although it is unequivocal, also turns out to be overdetermined in excess of what it seems to say. The Sandman “is the old lawyer, Coppelius, who sometimes eats with us at noon”. In German, however, this act of identification and of predication—S is P (subject is predicate)—involves the use of two words that in German sound and look almost identical, although they generally belong to two very different object-worlds: in English, the words “is” and “eats”. But in German the words are *ist* (is) and *ißt* (eats). This quasi-repetition is given particular weight through the syntax of the German phrase, which places the verb “eats” at the very end of the phrase. “. . . der manchmal bei uns zu Mittag *ißt* “!—” The German word for “eats” sounds and looks almost the same as the German word for “is”. As if to emphasize the enormity of this unheard-of association of being and eating, of “ist” and “ißt”, the last word is followed in the text by an exclamation point and a dash: the one giving force to Nathanael’s exclamation at recalling his discovery, and the second, the dash, emphasizing that this conclusion is only the beginning of something else—a “curious conclusion” as Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy might have called it.

What in the meanwhile has become something of a popular saying, following its publication in 1850 by Ludwig Feuerbach—“man ist was man ißt” (you are what you eat)—was in 1816, the year of publication of the Sandman, presumably much less familiar, and indeed in the particular context of “The Sandman” quite strange. The Sandman is a lawyer, Coppelius, who sometimes eats with us at lunch, Nathanael recounts. In view of his behavior at the lunch table, his existence recalls the brutal consumption of eyes recounted by Nathanael’s nurse when he asks her for information about the Sandman:

He’s a wicked man who comes to children when they won’t go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes, so that they pop right out of their heads all covered in blood, and then he throws them in a sack and carries them off to the half-moon to feed to his little children; they sit there in the nest, and have hooked beaks like owls, which they use to peck the eyes out of the heads of naughty children.¹⁵

The Sandman is thus already associated with a destructive consumption, stealing eyes to feed to his children. A parent, but a dangerous one. His “is” “eats” in multiple senses of the word: eats up in order to nourish.

What, however, is truly significant about this convergence of a certain being—is-ness—with eating is the way it goes beyond the singular case being described here and acquires a more general, indeed formal scope. Not for nothing is Coppelius identified as a lawyer, for the law that he applies is nothing less than the law of grammatical predication. Coppelius, the ostensibly proper name used to identify the Sandman, will return in the second part of the story as a double, translated into Italian as Coppola. This word sounds and looks almost the same as another word, which does not designate a visual object but rather a linguistic function, one that is quite relevant to its use here, since it is what allows objects to be identified and visualized. I am speaking of the grammatical term, the *copula*, which as the name suggests, couples or joins together the subject with a predicate, as in the phrase,

“the Sandman, the horrible Sandman IS the old lawyer Coppelius. . .” Except that here in this text, the repetition of *ist* as *ißt* suggests a link between eating, devouring, and being that calls into question the stability of a being that “is” only insofar as it “eats”.

As we have already seen, the story that Nathanael’s nanny tells Nathanael about the Sandman associates eating with destroying. The function of nurturing and that of dismembering thus converge in this ambivalent figure, but in a way that possibly points to a context that is no longer narrowly subjective or individual, since it involves the very meaning of what it means for a being—and in particular for a *living being—to be*.

4. Heidegger—The Third Person Singular

Here, a very short excursus may prove helpful. It has to do with the thinker who, alongside Freud but in very different ways, is doubtless the second great thinker of the Uncanny, namely Martin Heidegger. In his 1936 lectures subsequently published as the *Introduction into Metaphysics*, Heidegger links what he calls the “forgetting of Being” with the prevalence of the third person indicative form of the verb in determining the idea of being more generally. This prevalence of the “is” tends to obscure what for Heidegger is the decisive difference between the infinitive, to be, and its instantiations—in German between *Sein* and *Seiendes*.¹⁶ To try to summarize an extremely complex discussion, Heidegger concludes by suggesting that in the history of Western languages, starting from the Greek, the notion of Being—of “to be” (*Sein*)—has lost its differential specificity by being increasingly construed as a form of the third person singular use of the verb, “is”:

We take “to be” as the infinitive of “is”. [...] We involuntarily explain the infinitive ‘to be’ to ourselves on the basis of the “is”, almost as if nothing else were possible.¹⁷

In other words, this privileging of the “is” in construing being or to-be tends to conceive the latter as just another *entity*, thereby losing the sense of its transcendence. In terms of our previous discussion, one could also say it tends to treat being—*to be*—as though it were an *object* (hence the importance of the third-person singular, which preserves a certain distance from whatever “is”). The play on the sound of this third-person singular form of the verb *to be* in linking the identification of the Sandman to a being that “eats”, clearly undermines this Western tendency to hypostasize *to-be* as just another *object*. This allows Nathanael to identify the Sandman, first as Coppelius and then as Coppola, apparently once and for all. But as the story soon reveals, this *once and for all* turns out to be only the initial manifestation of a process of doubling, as Coppelius returns in the form of the seller of optical glasses, Coppola. Coppelius, one could say, “eats” up the identification it seems to permit by doubling itself, but with a difference. The shift from the ferociously feline figure of the *lawyer*—whose *law* turns out to be that of the self-consuming copula—to that of a *commercial optician* suggests further that this process of consumptive reduplication is inseparable from the singularity of the body, but in a way that undermines the usual privileging of the sense of sight as the major access to reality. The eyes are already portrayed as a function of perspective rather than the other way around. They are *prosthetic* even before Nathanael looks through the glass he purchases from Coppola. In short, the substitution of one’s eyes through Nathanael’s purchase and use of glasses, only points to the fact that the function of seeing is from the very start detachable from the body in which the eyes are situated.¹⁸

In his discussion of the Western privileging of the “is” as the exemplary form of being/to-be, Heidegger does not, to be sure, mention the Uncanny. He will, however, do that in the same set of lectures, albeit in a somewhat different context, in discussing the Greek conception of human being, which he finds articulated in a chorus from Sophocles’ *Antigone*. A discussion of Heidegger’s approach to the Uncanny would emphasize what in Freud remains largely unexplored, if implicit: namely, the possibility that the Uncanny may be historically and culturally related to a specific if long-standing Western tradition, which therefore need not be considered to be a universal and quasi-anthropological dimension of all human beings. My reason for suggesting this is that the tendency to construe being

as a form of entities or objects, from the perspective of the third person singular, the “is”, touches on what I take to be the specific historical and cultural dimension that also informs Freud’s discussion of “castration” and his reading of its manifestation in “The Sandman”. The crux of this historical and cultural bias can be seen in the way Freud, involuntarily perhaps, identifies with the tendency he is attributing to the male child to avoid the question of sexual difference by postulating the primacy and ubiquity of the phallus. As Freud puts it, the child finds it “natural [...] to assume that all living beings, persons and animals, possess a genital organ like his own. [...] He wants to see the same thing in other people [...]” (171–172). This makes the child unable or unwilling to acknowledge sexual difference as a non-oppositional relationship rather than reducing it to the presence or absence of the phallus. This resistance to difference is what inspires the narrative of castration, but also what Freud calls “the downfall of the Oedipus complex”, through its transformation into the ambivalent mental agency of the super-ego (Freud 1924).

What the detour via Heidegger’s discussion of the privileging of the “is”—of the third person singular perspective—suggests is that the historical and cultural specificity of the Uncanny may well be much more extensive than just the immediate context of its articulation by Freud: namely, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, might suggest. My tendency would be to grant it a very extensive scope while distinguishing it from the kind of universality that Freud claims. The large and long-standing tradition that it presupposes I would relate to what I have elsewhere discussed as the “mono-theological identity paradigm,” a paradigm that I take to be effective even and perhaps especially in so-called secularized societies insofar as they inherit a sense of identity derived from the notion of a universal and exclusive deity.¹⁹ Nevertheless this is obviously a large and extremely complex question that I attempt to raise here for further discussion.

5. Taking the Plunge

Let me now return to the second instance mentioned earlier of the Uncanny emerging in and troubling Freud’s reading of Hoffmann’s story, and in particular of its conclusion. For the sake of saving time, I have to eliminate much of the story, particularly the part involving Olimpia, and proceed directly to its dramatic conclusion:

Later, as a student, Nathanael thinks he recognizes this fearful figure from his childhood in the person of Giuseppe Coppola, an itinerant Italian optician who hawks weather-glasses in the university town. [...] He buys a pocket spyglass from Coppola and uses it to look into the house of Professor Spalanzani, where he catches sight of Olimpia, the professor’s beautiful but strangely silent and motionless daughter. He soon falls so madly in love with her that he forgets his wise and level-headed fiancée, Clara. But Olimpia is an automaton, for which Spalanzani has made the clockwork and in which Coppola ... has set the eyes.

Spalanzani and Coppola get into a dispute over which one is the rightful owner of Olimpia; they come to blows and tear Olimpia apart in the process. When Nathanael sees them rip out her bleeding eyes, he falls prey to another fit of madness, tries to strangle Spalanzani and falls into a coma. Having recovered apparently, he reconciles with Clara and tries to forget the past. They take a walk in the center of town, climb the church tower to have a better view of the surroundings. But when Nathanael uses the telescope he has purchased from Coppola to enjoy the sight, he is once again seized by madness, and “uttering the words, ‘Wooden doll spin round’” he tries to throw Clara off the tower. She is saved by her brother, Lothar, who, seeing the danger, has hurried to her rescue. Nathanael finally hurls himself from the heights of the tower to his death below.

In summarizing this final scene Freud makes a significant—indeed symptomatic—assumption:

Conspicuous among the people gathering below is the lawyer, Coppelius, who has suddenly reappeared. We may assume that it was the sight of his approach that brought on Nathanael's fit of madness. (Freud 1925, p. 138)

However, in making this assumption about whom or what Nathanael sees through the binoculars he has purchased from Coppola, Freud curiously overlooks what the text of the story explicitly tells. I have to quote this scene at some length for the context to become legible. This is how it reads:

The two lovers stood arm in arm on the highest platform of the tower and gazed into the redolent forest, behind which the blue mountains rose like a gigantic city.

"Look at that strange little grey bush, which seems to advance toward us rapidly", said Clara.—Nathanael grasped mechanically into his side pocket, he found Coppola's perspective (*Coppolas Perspektiv*), he looked sideways—Clara stood in front of the glass! Suddenly his pulse and veins throbbed spasmodically, pale as death (*totenbleich*) he stared at Clara, but soon fire streams glowed and pulsed through his rolling eyes, he roared horribly like a cornered animal, then sprang high in the air, and gruesomely laughing cried out in a cutting tone, "Wooden dolly turn around, wooden dolly turn around" and with ferocious force grabbed Clara and tried to throw her off the tower [...]. (Gaiman 2023, p. 40)

In my quotation of this passage, I have opted for a more literal rendition of the German word "*Perspektiv*" rather than the more idiomatic "telescope" or even "binoculars".²⁰ I have done so because what is involved here is not just a technical object that assists vision by magnifying objects but rather a set of relationships through which the appearance of objects is defined by "their distance from the viewer", as one dictionary puts it. The "perspective" here is not just that of Nathanael, or even Hoffmann, but also Freud's. Except that Freud does not see or read what Nathanael is forced to confront, if only by looking to one side. When Nathanael looks through Coppola's "*Perspektiv*", which he mechanically removed from his side pocket, he does not look straight ahead, not at first anyway, but to the side (and here we may recall that Freud begins his article on the Uncanny by emphasizing that it too is located on the margins, off to the side, with respect to the perspective of the discipline of aesthetics—*Abseits* is the German word he uses). Nathanael thus reflexively but without reflecting seizes the binoculars from his side pocket and stares, but not at Coppola, Coppelius or "the little grey bush" that recalls the "grey bushy eyebrows" he describes as marking Coppelius' face at the family lunch table. Rather, what Nathanael sees, and what brings about his final fit of madness, is not Coppelius, or Coppola, but Clara, his fiancé: "Klara stand vor dem Glase!" Clara stood before the glass! What could be clearer! But this is not a clarity that Freud is looking for, any more than it is one that Nathanael can accept. Like the little boy who insists on seeing sexual difference as "castration", Nathanael responds to the non-objectal appearance of difference by seeking to transform it into an object of aggression. The decisive gesture here is that of the "throw"—the "jet" that seeks to turn difference into an identifiable, intentional object. It marks the effort of the I to reestablish a certain continuum of the self where such continuity has been interrupted by irreducible differences. Nathanael's inability to acknowledge such differences, without presupposing a prior subordinating identity, is what he tries to save in the fantasy of a circular turn of fire, the circle being the figure of a self-contained continuum. But since it excludes all relation to exteriority, its self-containment becomes self-consumption. It can only consume, and thus "eats" its "is" in a fatally closed repetition.

Freud, however, does not see or read this explicit event: he sees only Coppelius, as a clearly identifiable malevolent figure. He does not *read* what Nathanael *sees*, "Clara" standing "in front of the glass". Just as the young boy does not acknowledge the differential relationality of the anatomical sexual difference. Such denied difference, which constitutes an indispensable condition for the development of sexual identity, "returns" in and as the visible image of Clara, "standing" in for what Nathanael cannot accept and what drives him to self-destroy. The act of suicidal self-destruction is a last desperate attempt to reestablish

the continuum that a certain I cannot renounce. That self-destruction takes the form of an incendiary, self-consuming “circle of fire”. The circle is both consummated and exposed by Nathanael’s final move. In a gesture that consummates the trajectory of his self-destructive desire, Nathanael leaps to his death. This is his final attempt to domesticate the radical alterity of death by inscribing it as the object or goal of an intentional act. This can be read as a repetition of Nathanael’s earlier move when, seized by terror at viewing the Sandman, he *plunges* from his hiding place in his father’s closet. The word “plunge” translates the German verb used by Hoffmann to describe this involuntary, terrified movement of self-exposure: *stürzt*. *Stürzen* in German designates a sudden falling movement that is involuntary and violent. A *Blutsturz* is the verb for a violent hemorrhage. It is precisely the involuntary, uncontrolled aspect of the *Sturz* that distinguishes it from Nathanael’s fatal leap from the tower: first seeking unsuccessfully to *hurl* his fiancé, Clara, to her death below, he finally takes his own suicidal *plunge*.

6. Projecting the Perspective

We can begin now to summarize some of the theoretical implications of this literary scene. If we recall that Freud describes the I as the “projection of a surface”, we can glimpse here the different aspects of that projection. It first of all entails a throw, a violent effort to traverse space and impose upon it a certain continuity and depth, which the I as essentially a set of surfaces lacks. This projection seeks to assimilate to self-consciousness the temporal and spatial “before”—the “pro”—and the distance it portends, through the movement of throwing. Its throw seeks to cast its pro-jection as an ob-ject. The Uncanny emerges when this expectation of a continuous cast (as projection and object) repeats itself as a *Sturz* or a plunge, that resembles the throw but without presenting itself as an intentional act with an originating source or identifiable goal.

In short, the Uncanny here mimics the desire of the I to affirm its own unity, consistency and coherence over time and space by confronting it with instances of repetition and recurrence that cannot be made *meaningful* by being viewed as the product of an originating intention or final purpose. This is why the figure of the automaton is so closely related to the Uncanny, since it tends to personify this interrupted expectation of self-identical (automatic) recurrence. This is the significance of Olimpia for Nathanael. But Freud is undoubtedly right in asserting that this is not the most powerful moment of the Uncanny *in this story*. The reason is that whereas the first part of the novella is narrated in the first-person singular, through an exchange of letters, the second part, in which Olimpia appears, is narrated in the third-person, by someone purporting to be a friend of Nathanael but who as third person is already at a safe distance from him. Readers then read through the perspective of this third person and not through the perspective of Nathanael, which is also “Coppola’s Perspective”, the perspective of a participant and not of a detached spectator. Freud confirms the indispensable importance of such a participatory perspective when toward the end of his essay he explains why the same motif, that of a severed hand, can produce an Uncanny effect in one text but not in another, where it also occurs:

A while back we asked why the motif of the severed hand did not have the same Uncanny effect in Herodotus’ story of the treasure of Rhampsenitus and it did in Hauff’s “Story of the Severed Hand”. [...] The answer is simple: in the former tale all our attention is concentrated not on the princess’s feelings, but on the superior cunning of the master-thief. She may not have been spared a sense of the Uncanny [...] but *we* have no sense of the Uncanny, because *we put ourselves in the place of the thief*, not in hers. (158, final italics mine—SW)

“We put ourselves in the place of the thief”—after searching throughout his article for an objective definition of the Uncanny, as something that would take the form of S is P, Freud finally comes to the conclusion that this reliance on the decisive function of the copula is mistaken, and that it must be replaced by what I, following Hoffmann’s text, am proposing to call “Coppola’s Perspective”: this involves not an object or a substance to be defined in terms of its properties, but an encounter and a relationship, or perhaps a series of

relationships. Since what is distinctive about Coppola's perspective as a key to the Uncanny is that it does not simply repeat identically the traditional notion of "perspective"—it is not simply an extended form of visual perception -- because what it aims at cannot simply be *seen* but must be *read*: "Clara stood before the glass!" The exclamation point at the end of the phrase, qualifies it as what stylistic criticism once called the "style indirect libre"—free indirect style -- which presents content from a third-person perspective that entails a first-person singular experience, without it being either the one or the other. The exclamation point refers back to Nathanael's surprise, whereby "stood" signifies the imperviousness of what he sees but cannot assimilate.

However the non-objectivity of the Uncanny is not the sign of its pure subjectivity either. Coppola's perspective remains the "property" of Coppola and of Coppelius even if Nathanael has purchased it. It is their property insofar as they signify and represent collective historical, social and cultural traditions that allow things to "stand" in place, albeit only to interrupt themselves, just as Clara interrupts herself here. In her discussions with Nathanael, Clara clearly represents the limited perspective of 18th century rationalism. Her basic message to Nathanael is that his problem is strictly of his own making, in his head as it were. This assumes the same kind of autonomy that in a different way Nathanael is doomed to seek for himself. Except that it privileges the power of self-consciousness to control the anxieties of an I that knows itself to be in an impossible position and yet cannot alter it.

In Freudian terms, this involves the distinction between what is conscious (or rather, self-conscious) and the unconscious. It is significant that Freud at one point describes this distinction as one involving language:

I have already, in another place, suggested that the real difference between a Ucs. [unconscious] and a Pcs. [preconscious] idea (thought) is this: that the former is carried out on some material which remains unknown, whereas the latter (the Pcs.) is in addition brought into connection with word-presentations (*Wortvorstellung*). (Ego and Id, 12)

In an earlier essay, on "The Unconscious" (1915), Freud had reformulated this distinction as that between word- and thing-presentations:

We now seem to know all at once what the difference is between a conscious and an unconscious presentation. The two are not, as we supposed, different registrations of the same content in different psychical localities, nor yet different functional states of cathexis in the same locality; but the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone. The system Ucs. contains the thing-cathexes of the objects, the first and true object-cathexes [...]²¹

In short, Freud is here providing a linguistic explanation not just of the decisive distinction between consciousness (always to be understood as an abbreviation of self-consciousness) and the unconscious, but of the grammatical function of the copula in a proposition. Consciousness arises when what he will elsewhere call "thing-presentations" (*Sachvorstellung* or *Dingvorstellung*) are linked—coupled—with words (*Wortvorstellung*). This reposes on "memory residues" of what Freud takes to be an acoustical experience. However, it is clear that the associations of words and things in language requires an element that allows certain "acoustical memories" to be retained and to be widely shared. We will return shortly to how Freud imagines such a process to operate, beyond the level of purely individual experience and memory.

But first we must consider the special situation of what Freud calls "feelings", which includes anxiety and thus is of particular significance for the question of the Uncanny. In regard to feelings, the clear-cut distinction tends to break down, because for Freud, feelings cannot be unconscious, which would seem to imply that they require a certain coupling of word- with thing-representations. However, Freud also insists that feelings do not relate to

things as do other mental representations. This is particularly evident in the case of anxiety, since it is precisely a certain lack of object that distinguishes it from related sentiments, such as fear:

Anxiety (*Angst*) has an unmistakable relation to *expectation*: it is anxiety *about* something (*vor etwas*: literally, *before* something). It has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*. In precise speech we use the word ‘fear’ (*Furcht*) rather than ‘anxiety’ (*Angst*) if it has found an object. (Freud 1969, p. 100)

Freud amplifies this a few pages later in the same essay, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety*: Thus, the first determinant of anxiety, *which the ego itself introduces* is loss of perception of the object (which is equated with loss of the object itself). (106, my italics—SW)

Note that it is “the ego itself” that “introduces” the anxiety-generating “loss of perception”, which it equates “with loss of the object itself”. But this is tantamount to asserting that anxiety is produced by a certain perspective of the I, which in turn involves memory traces of experiences that are projected temporally as a possible future encounter. The question then becomes just how such memory traces function and whether they can be limited to an essentially individual intrapsychic experience or whether a transpersonal, social and historical transmission must also be considered.

7. “Residues of Countless Egos”

The question of how Freud construes the collective dimension of psychical structure is extremely complex and can only be touched on here. I will limit myself to just a few points in the texts we have been discussing, points that bear directly or indirectly on the problem of “the Uncanny”.

The following section of his text on “The Ego and the Id” addresses the question of what he calls “phylogenesis”:

With the mention of phylogenesis, however, fresh problems arise, from which one is tempted to draw cautiously back. But there is no help for it, the attempt must be made—in spite of a fear that it will lay bare the inadequacy of our whole effort. The question is: which was it, the ego of primitive man or his id, that acquired religion and morality in those early days of the father-complex? (Freud 1923b, p. 34)

Freud’s caution and reticence here are well-founded, since his perspective is informed by metahistorical anthropological categories, properly discredited today, such as that of “primitive man”, which enable him to project a universal continuum linking his analysis of historically specific individual experience onto an indeterminate prehistorical past. The very notion of “phylogenesis” presupposes such a continuum. Nevertheless, despite this crude anthropological bias, the reflections that he goes on to develop allow one to envisage a very different and more differentiated form of historical transmission:

Reflection at once shows us that no external vicissitudes can be experienced or undergone by the id, except by way of the ego, which is the representative of the external world to the id. Nevertheless, it is not possible to speak of direct inheritance in the ego. It is here that *the gulf between an actual individual and the concept of the species* becomes evident. [...] *The experiences of the ego seem at first to be lost for inheritance; but, when they have been repeated often enough and with sufficient strength in many individuals in successive generations, they transform themselves, so to say, into experiences of the id, the impressions of which are preserved by heredity.* Thus, in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harbored *residues of the existences of countless egos* and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be *reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection.* (Freud 1923b, p. 35, my italics—SW)

To be sure, Freud is here only speculating, but the conclusions he draws are both striking and significant. The key factor in bridging “the gulf between an actual individual” and the collective—which Freud construes as the human species but which can also be considered in a more limited historical, social and cultural sense—something more than individual memory is required. Where can “the experiences of the ego” be “repeated often enough” across generations so as to escape the limitations of individual memory and yet still be preserved as “residues of the existences of countless ego”? In intrapsychic terms, Freud points to the superego as the ‘home’ of these “countless past egos” and indeed as the place where they are brought “to resurrection”. It is the desire of such resurrection that is both recognized and undone by the Coppola perspective.

The medium in and through which individual “experiences of the ego” can be “repeated often enough” by “many individuals in successive generations” is none other than language, and in particular, the consolidation of those shared links between word- and thing-representations. This takes different forms, of course, extending from the shared meanings of individual words and sentences to the patterns in which such meanings are organized into propositions and predications. In all of these what I have been calling the *Coppola Perspective* is decisive.

It is this perspective that drives Nathanael to fall in love with the automaton that is Olympia, as the Uncanny mimicry of the autonomous subject that the I—the Western I at least—seeks to be, while at the same time abandoning itself to a repetition that has no self other than the echo of his own words:

For it seemed to him as if Olympia had spoken concerning him and his poetical talent out of the depths of his own mind; as if her voice had actually sounded from within himself. That must indeed have been the case, for Olympia never uttered any words whatever beyond those which have already been recorded. (Gaiman 2023, p. 14)

But it is not in the vision of the goddess-like “Olimpia” that the Coppola perspective reveals its full force. Rather it is in the more prosaic vision of Clara, standing in front of the glass, that its destructive force explodes. Clara stands in the way of the image that the I of Nathanael needs to confirm its own self-identity. Clara names what can never be clearly seen: the difference upon which all identification depends and yet what it is forced to deny and reject, in the name of being self-same.²²

8. Bridging the Gulf—Breaching the Gap

Let me conclude these observations by referring to a word that Heidegger invokes to describe the effect of the Uncanny in his discussion of the chorus from Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Heidegger argues that human being responds to the overwhelming force of the Uncanny by “breaching” the stability it has been able to construct. It is in “willing the unprecedented” and “shattering the work”—that is the constructed object of intentional consciousness—that humans experience this “breach” (*Bresche*) of convention, abruptly and momentarily.²³ Translated into a more Freudian language, we could say that it is perhaps not *human being* as such that experiences this but rather a specific aspect of humanity, which Freud calls the I, which both seeks to establish a certain continuity and constancy and which is therefore directly engaged in and exposed to the experience of the Uncanny. The value of Heidegger’s notion of “breach” is to suggest that the precondition of this experience is something like a *defensive line or barrier* that is upended abruptly if only temporarily by the Uncanny. The decisive distinction between Heidegger and Freud is the emphasis the former places on the to-be (*Sein*) as the source of the upending, tied to the conundrum of mortality, whereas for Freud the anxiety involved is inseparable from the first person singular, the I, confronted with the convergence of similitude with difference in a recurrence that reveals itself to be irreducibly heterogeneous.

The cultural tradition that both acknowledges but also denies this heterogeneity Heidegger designates as “ontotheology” (See Heidegger 1969; Thompson 2005). Retracing it to the ancient Greeks, and reinforced through Christianity, he argues that it promotes the

effacing of the “ontological difference” between being and beings—between the to-be (*Sein*) and being (*Seiendes*). I propose instead to focus on the reduction in alterity as a consequence of what I call the “mono-theological identity paradigm”, in which the notion of a single universal deity serves as the model and focal point of the self-same, even where it appears in a so-called secular form of autonomous subjectivity. The Coppola perspective demonstrates how a certain desire to be precisely a “first person” is disrupted by its encounter with a process of repetition upon which it depends and yet that also undoes its pretenses to be first and foremost. The experience of the Uncanny demonstrates this shock of misrecognition as a function not of vision or of being, but of a perspective of language, encapsulated in the tension between the infinitive to-be, and the finitude of the future to-be. The Uncanny thus challenges us to rethink the relation of the *to-be* and the *not-to-be*—and above all to *feel* this relation as the tension of tenses that are no longer necessarily mutually exclusive.

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Notes

- ¹ Nietzsche, one of the forerunners in thinking the Uncanny, singled out this unchallenged belief in non-contradiction as the blind spot of Western philosophy. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1.2, he observed that “the metaphysicians fundamental belief is *the belief in the opposition of values*. It has never occurred even to the most cautious among them to raise doubts here at the threshold, where doubts would be most necessary [...]” (Nietzsche 1998, p. 6).
- ² X. Kant, in the *Critique of the Power to Judge*, already appeals to an intelligence “like ours” governing what otherwise would appear to be a radically singular and hence incomprehensible phenomenon. This allows chance to be understood as a mode of reflection (“reflecting judgment”) albeit one that is radically incomprehensible except as a subjective, heuristic—or rather defensive—device. The radical alterity of the singular is thus understood as “like” our self-reflective consciousness. The often-criticized emphasis on psychic causality in Freud’s work can perhaps be seen as a theoretical form of compensation for the practical delimitation of self-conscious control through unconscious repression that marks most of his psychoanalytical theory.
- ³ S. Freud, “Timely Thoughts on War and Death,” *SE* 14, 341. I have discussed this passage briefly in my *Targets of Opportunity* (Weber 2005).
- ⁴ *The Ego and the Id*, p. 60.
- ⁵ These lectures will only be published in German after the war, in 1953.
- ⁶ (Heidegger 1958). This return of the repressed can be related to Heidegger’s vastly different interpretation of the final lines of the chorus from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in which the Chorus concludes by declaring the Uncanny to be off-limits with respect to its home and hearth. I have discussed this “turning” of Heidegger in “Mistaking the Measure of Poetry,” in (Weber 2021), pp. 363–84.
- ⁷ This perspective is that of the chorus in Sophocles’ *Antigone*: after describing human being as “the most Uncanny” in part because of its inability to master its mortality, the chorus concludes by vowing to keep the uncanniness far from its home and hearth. In his initial discussion of this chorus in the 1936 lectures, Heidegger interprets this conclusion as a defensive acting-out (my terminology, to be sure, not his). But in his 1942 lectures (on Hölderlin’s poem, “The Ister”), when he gives a much more elaborate reading of the chorus, he tries to portray this conclusion of the chorus more positively as an attempt to rise to the challenge of being “at home” (heimisch) in the Uncanny, rather than as an effort to keep it at a distance.
- ⁸ *The Ego and the Id*, 61.
- ⁹ The word itself contains hints about this internal ambivalence: why after all, given its conventional meanings—the state of being unbiased, unprejudiced—should the root be the verb to “throw” (-ject, from the Latin *jacere*), much less throw *against*? What I am trying to suggest here is that the tension suggested by this etymology may be endemic to the very notion of the object as Freud is invoking it here, but without his exploring its rich ambiguity.
- ¹⁰ This is also why Freud considers all causally consistent narratives in the retelling of dreams part of its distortion, as a “secondary elaboration”, and why the interpretation of dreams requires the dismantling of such causal sequences as its indispensable first step.
- ¹¹ Here as elsewhere I distinguish between *meaning*, which in common usage implies conscious *intention*, and *significance*, which results from the *differential interplay* of signifiers.
- ¹² “Imagine, if you will, a tall man with broad shoulders and a large, misshapen head, an ochre-yellow face, bushy grey eyebrows below which sparkled a pair of piercing, greenish cat’s eyes, and a great nose that protruded right down over his upper lip” (Gaiman 2023).

- 13 The German word for “dirty joke” is *Zote*, which derives from “tangle of hair”. Freud assigns considerable importance to this form of joke in his book on Wit in its Relation to the Unconscious. I have explored this relationship in my study (Weber 2000).
- 14 I have discussed how hair and particularly feminine hair provide a “thallic” alternative to the imaginary attempt to prioritize the phallus in (Weber 2000).
- 15 E. Th. A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman”, p. 7.
- 16 I note in passing that I would be tempted to render Heidegger’s distinction in German between *Sein* and *Seiendes* not as *Being* and *beings*, as usually translated, but as *to-be* and *being*. But here is not the place to explain why I find this both more literal and more precise than the conventional rendition.
- 17 (Heidegger 2014, p. 100). German edition, (Heidegger 1958, p. 70.) See also (Derrida 1982, passim).
- 18 In passing it should also be noted that the union in Coppola of the commercial vendor of optical glasses with the stealing of eyes can be seen as a commentary on the economic dimension of self-consumption through self-realization that marks commodity societies. This has become topical in an age in which the trafficking of organs has become a worldwide business, in part made possible through the development of biotechnologies—represented in the novella by the figure of Professor Spallanzani.
- 19 See my discussion of this category in (Weber 2021).
- 20 In emphasizing the literal translation of *Perspektiv*, I follow Michael Levine in his insightful reading (Levine 2022).
- 21 «The Unconscious» SE 14, 200. GW X, 298.
- 22 In all of these aspects, Clara here exemplifies what Benjamin called the “dialectical image”, in which the “dialectic” of history is brought to a standstill without losing its destructive force—a force that is here all too “revolutionary”.
- 23 Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, loc. cit., p. 182.

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