Psychoanalytic approaches to the uncanny

Ever since Freud published his famous essay *The Uncanny* in 1919, the notion has had a prominent place in psychoanalytic thinking. Following Freud's discussion it has been particularly important in interpreting psychoanalytically works of literature and art, but its significance is actually much wider when we think of how the past is present in our lives and minds. Something that seems to be familiar or homely may turn into something strange, frightening and uncanny. This is because we never are fully aware of all the possible conflicts and anxieties within us or between us as individual minds. It is pivotal for psychoanalytic thinking in general to be always open to such ambiguities, and the notion of uncanny has proved to be indispensable here.

Freud himself was originally a neuroscientist, who invented psychoanalysis and then gave up the project researching the connections between mind and brain. His principal interest in these connections remained however. More recently the discussions concerning neuropsychoanalysis have been lively indeed and new theoretical ideas as well as applications are brought up. This is the case with the uncanny as well. The workshop is built up of three papers that approach the uncanny from different perspectives, neuroscientific, philosophical and religious, and also discuss the wider significance of psychoanalytic approaches to the uncanny. The overall aim is to contribute to the discussions of the conference topics.

Convener:

The workshop will be chaired by Jussi Kotkavirta, who is psychoanalyst in private practice in Helsinki.

The Neuroscientific Uncanny: An investigation into the limits of scientific method

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Filmmaker Susannah Gent employs a diverse range of methodological approaches to investigate the uncanny, including art practice, psychoanalysis, and scientific method. Following Mark Solm’s assertion: 'There can't be a mind for neuroscience and a mind for psychoanalysis. There's only one human mind', (Schwartz 2015) she believes that interdisciplinary approaches will reveal interesting peripheral elements which would not come to light through single field investigations.

In 'Das "Unheimlich"' Freud describes the uncanny as a 'class of fear'. For many years emotion has been considered too subjective and inappropriate for scientific study yet it was Freud's conviction that psychoanalysis was a science. Recent brain imaging technology has lead to a resurgence of interest in emotion in scientific fields.

Gent’s research involves an eye tracking survey and an fMRI study which aim to see if scientific approaches can lead to uncovering a neurological underpinning to the uncanny. This study is
combined with an experimental film project which documents the process as well as instilling uncanny sensations in the audience, an approach which recognises art practice as a form of research. By allowing the creative process, a method led by non- or unconscious affective decision making, an external artefact, in this case an experimental film, can provide the focus for intersubjective dialogue against a backdrop of objective, scientific method.

Currently Gent has undertaken a behavioural study which has produced an image set of 300 images rated according to eeriness valance by 250 participants. In this presentation Gent will look at the top ten of those images and discuss why she feels psychoanalysis offers the best analytical tools for understanding how these images act upon the participants.

The image set is intriguing and includes, in the top ten, an image of euphemistically named *prairie oysters* from a cookery blog, suggesting that the Freudian castration complex may hold a place in the collective human psyche.

This research-in-progress evaluation of interdisciplinary approaches is underpinned by the conviction that humanistic investigations can compliment scientific research as they employ methods unavailable to objective research, essential when researching subjectivity. Ultimately Gent believes that our experience of the uncanny stems, in part, from the haphazard evolutionary development of the brain, where mismatches between our consciousness experiences and unconscious processes produce cognitive dissonance. This indicates a gap or grey area between what we experience and what we think we know.

Keywords: uncanny, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, neuropsychoanalysis, interdisciplinary, consciousness, unconscious, Freud, Damasio, brain

This presentation would last fifteen minutes and would require facilities for showing images and moving image from DVD or on-line source.

**Bibliography**


Susannah Gent, senior lecturer in film production at Sheffield Hallam University, is studying for a practice based PhD, which employs interdisciplinary methods to investigate the ‘Uncanny’ by combining filmmaking, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience, to better understand consciousness and human emotion in relation to the cinematic image.

The images below are from the behavioural survey, discussed above, which would form part of the proposed presentation.
The uncanny and experience

Sami Santanen

"The ego is not master in its own house" (S. Freud). In philosophical terms: "The subject is not master in its own house" (B. Waldenfels). This state of affairs is a matter of experience, although the experience proves to be of extraordinary character. In this paper I compare Freud’s psychoanalytic approach to the experience of the uncanny and Waldenfels’s phenomenological conception of what he calls the alien experience (Fremderfahrung), that is, of the pathicity of experience. What I’m trying to show is that there are, in Freud’s analysis, some elements that help to understand the radicality of the idea of the alien experience. At the same time there are to be found certain aspects of the uncanny resonating in Waldenfels analysis that are more stressed by other thinkers than Freud.
To begin with the experience of the uncanny, let it be noted that Freud approaches the uncanny from the point of view of the psyche. As to my topic the discussion that Freud devotes at the outset of the article “The Uncanny” (das Unheimliche) (1919) to the meanings of the German word unheimlich (uncanny) is of central importance. He finds that the word heimlich – the latter component of the word unheimlich signifying usually “familiar” or “homely” – also means “secret”, “kept from sight” (or otherwise repressed) that is identical to its opposite unheimlich. Unheimlich and heimlich (“unfamiliar” and “familiar”), then, are intertwined, they are in this respect not opposites. Freud quotes the Schellingian formula “everything is unheimlich that ought to have to remain secret and hidden but has come to light” and, consequentially, links the phenomenon of the uncanny to repression, to the return of the repressed. Here I would like, however, to refer to Heidegger’s view of the uncanny. He sees the familiar as a mode of the uncanniness while Freud in “The Uncanny” holds that “the uncanny [...] leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”.

For Bernard Waldenfels this kind of difference has no relevance although the moment of the alien (Fremde) gains in importance and is radicalized in his analysis of pathic experience. For him the uncanny described by Freud permeates the home, the familiar resulting in the alien experience inhabited by the uncanny. The extra-ordinary nature of this experience and e.g. the spatial implications will be discussed.

**Sense of sacred in psychotherapy**

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In my doctoral thesis I have studied how psychotherapists manage the religious, spiritual or existential material of their patient’s. In this qualitative study I analysed interviews of 11 psychodynamic and 9 cognitive psychotherapists. My main focus is to describe what it feels like to work with this kind of material and why this material is still sometimes so specific in its nature, that it is difficult to work with. It was a real surprise to me that some of the psychotherapists really sensed or realised moments when their patients were in contact with their own deep sense of sacred or holy. When this happened, they ceased to work with psychotherapeutic tools and just respected their patients experience. They did not have need to verbalize or rationalize these phenomena. It was something that was happening on the level of experience.

One of the core ideas in my dissertation is that people are object-oriented from birth. We form internal representations of objects and of ourselves in relation to these objects’. These representations in our mind change constantly, if we let them change. Very meaningful in this respect is the so called transitional space. In the childhood transitional space first develops when the child uses some kind of transitional object. This object represents at the same time part of something outside of the child, and something inside his/her mind. In an optimal situation this transitional space stays with the person and it can be used in a very creative way. If one can use his/her transitional space freely, art, religion and new scientific theories develop.
Transitional space is also the place where all knowledge of experiences lies. Here we are mostly human beings and can experience how other humans, things, phenomena and relations feel. These are also experiences we are not capable of fully expressing in words. These experiences are possibly uncanny and at least deeply personal.

In psychotherapies people are asked to talk and express everything that is on their mind. If psychotherapy is to be optimally beneficial to the person this deep level of experiencing should also come to the front. Then it is crucial how the psychotherapist listens to her/his patient. If the psychotherapist is too hasty with her/his interventions or can’t reach this level of being with the patient, the results of psychotherapy can be disintegrating to the patient instead of the patient becoming more whole.

Key words: psychotherapy, transitional space, representations of the mind, object-oriented, religion, spirituality, knowledge of experiences, holy, sacred