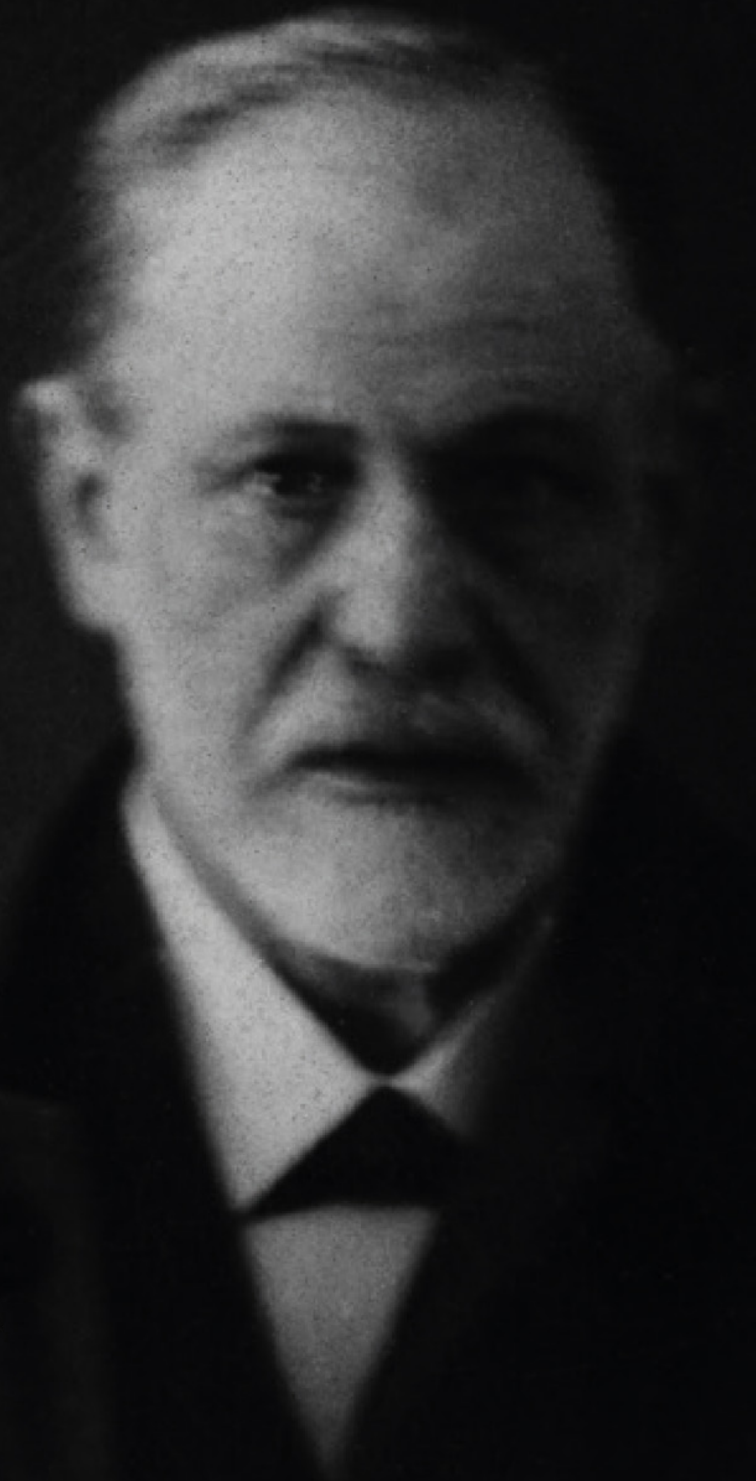


FREUD MUSEUM
LONDON



A CENTENARY **the
uncanny**

The Uncanny: A Centenary

30 October 2019 - 9 February 2020

Edited by Ivan Ward

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Cover image: Sigmund Freud, 1920 ©Freud Museum London

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Children at the Hampstead War Nurseries, 1940 ©Freud Museum London

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There is one more point of general application which I should like to add [...] This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced...

Sigmund Freud



Ghost Writing

There is no royal road to the uncanny.

No straight course, no direct path. Every *Weg* is an *Umweg*. We will have to take the long way around. Whichever route you take towards *das unheimlich*, you get it the wrong way around. It gets you the wrong way around. It haunts. *Es spukt*. And the worst of it is that it may not be you it is haunting.

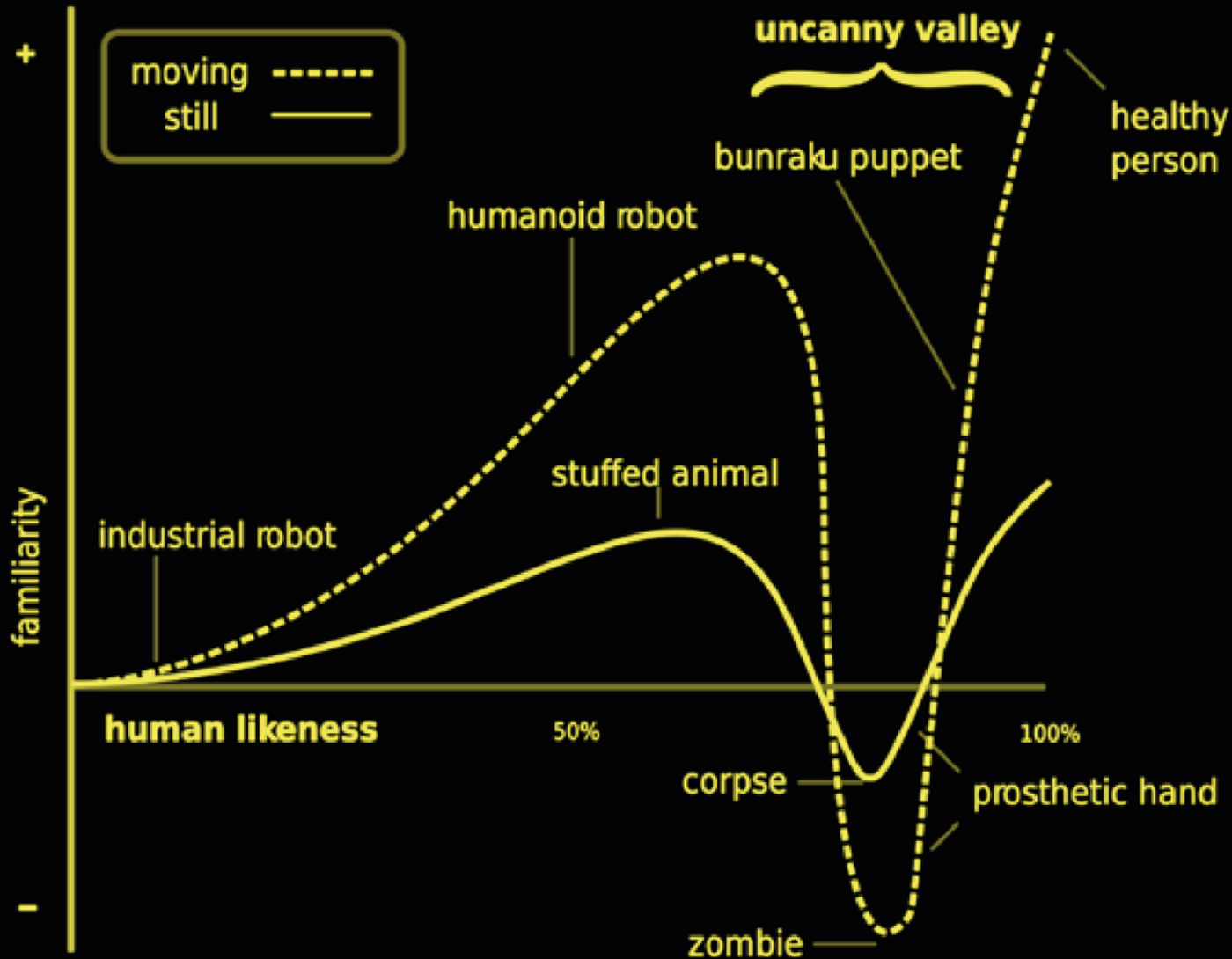
You will recognize this talk of paths. Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (in German '*Das Unheimliche*') begins by proposing two paths (in German *Wege*) toward its subject, the uncanny. One path leads through language and the meanings of the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. The other leads through the sense-impressions and experiences which provoke feelings of uncanniness. Freud says that alone *in thought* he walked the path of experience before the path of language. Now with us *in writing* he will walk them the other way around. The order does not matter, though. 'I will say at once that both courses [*Wege*] lead to the same result: the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.'

Freud knows where we are going. He gives us the ending, which—you may remember—his essay significantly lacks, at the beginning. All paths lead to the uncanny. How could one possibly get lost? Unless the uncanny were by definition something one does not know one's way about in.

This certainty is where 'The Uncanny' and its investigation of the uncanny begins. If you have not read it, you should allow yourself to be fascinated and frustrated by its presentation. It is an odd piece, a strange text, even an uncanny one.

I want to investigate, rather, where the process of the essay's writing might have begun for Freud. What follows is speculation. Speculation about what haunts '*Das Unheimliche*' and where it may find itself at home. The surviving record of the text's origin is modest. 'I also took up the little thing about the "uncanny" again,' Freud writes in a 12 May 1919 letter to his friend and colleague Sándor Ferenczi. Freud's biographer Ernest Jones and his translator James Strachey dramatise the scene: Freud has dug an old paper out of a drawer and is re-writing it. But there is no certainty of an earlier draft or of a drawer. All that remains

The Disruptive Uncanny



Occasionally our taken-for-granted world collapses into something weird, awesome, even eerie. One hundred years ago, Freud tracked this bizarre experience when familiar ordinariness becomes unspeakably strange. He said it 'undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible - to all that arouses dread and creeping horror' (1919, p.219), and works by effacing 'the distinction between imagination and reality' (p.244).

Horror films capitalise on this ambiguity. Playing on the viewer's primitive emotions and prejudices, this genre terrifyingly leads us back, like our dreams, to a sense of something glimpsed yet ungraspable. Vampires, unladen ghosts, or other monstrosities act as 'harbingers of death', resonating with terrors from our long-forgotten pasts. While mechanical beings that mimic the living (automatons, post-human facsimiles or hybrid cyborgs) unleash anxieties about forces beyond rational appeal.

From ancient times, to boost such spectral uncanniness, literature relies on the coexistence of a burgeoning plurality of connotations alongside our binary logic. Drama thrives on profound slippage, plunging us from a platform of predictive assumptions into the undiscovered yet

unconsciously known. We are transfixed by transgression of the incest-taboo when Queen Jocasta the wife abruptly morphs into the (abandoning) mother. Confusion rises when suppositions fail. Remember the audible audience shock in Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game* (1992) as the sexual equivocality of the love object is exposed? Or your mental spin-around in Ali Smith's novel *How to be Both* (2014)?

Otto Rank's psychoanalytic study *Der Doppelgänger* (1914) cited many breath-stopping examples in fables, fiction and early film, of identity-theft, looking-glass rejuvenation or aging, absent mirror reflections and sinister shadowlessness. Delving into the devil-pact origins of soul bargains, of over-identification with strangers or suicidal ego-cleavage, Rank linked these tales to psychic disturbances and schismatic hallucinatory experiences in their authors.

Four years later, Freud published his own study '*Das Unheimliche*', retrieved from the drawer wherein it languished. Focusing on the distinctive sense of strangeness in familiarity, he concluded that 'animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's



Dolls, Dead Bodies & Doubles

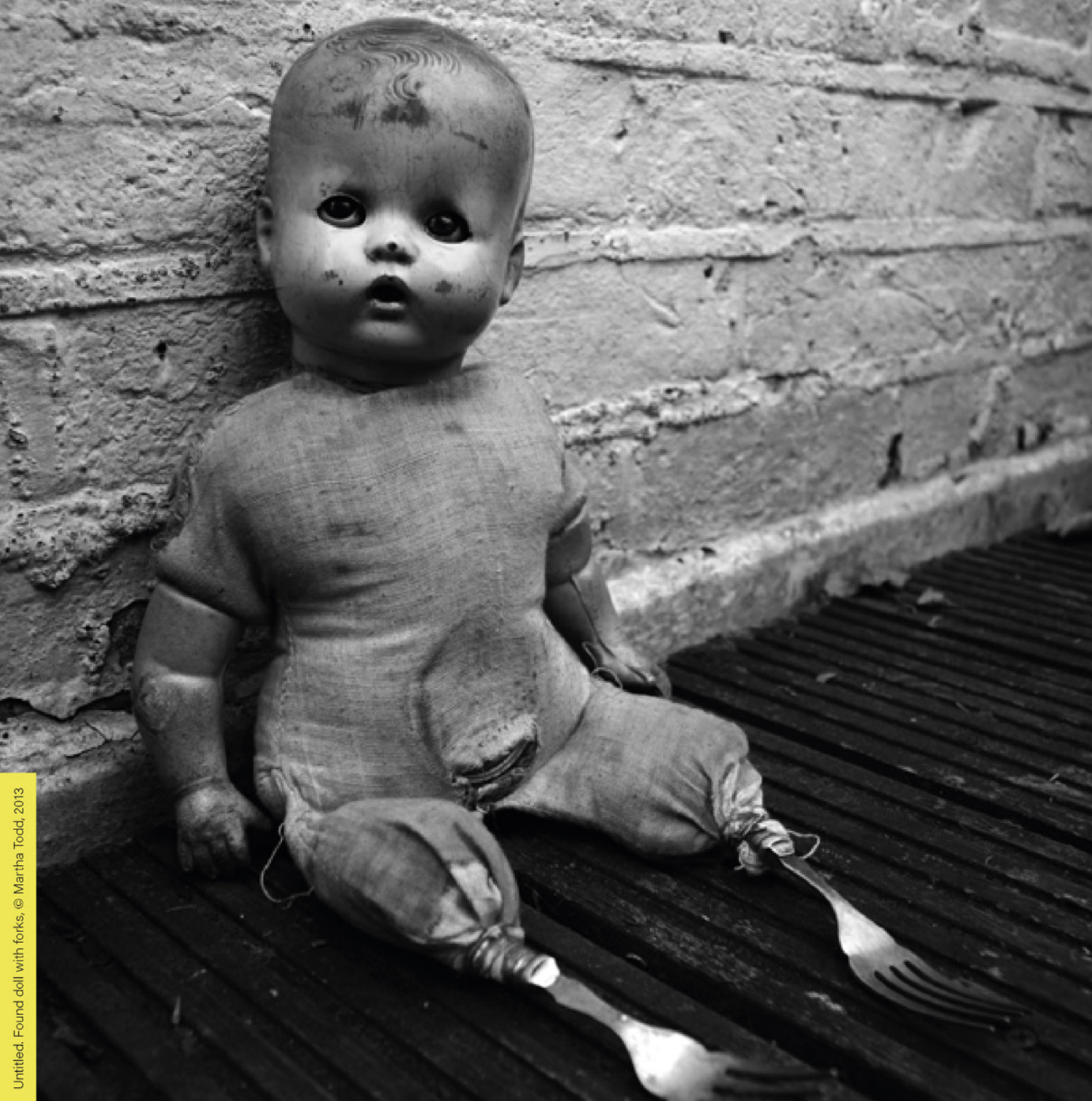
Freud's Influence

Freud could not have envisaged the effect 'The Uncanny' would have on artists in the century after its publication, even though he acknowledged that the uncanny is a theory related to aesthetics. In his innovative and expanded view of aesthetics it was understood to mean 'not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling' (p.219). Particularly, in this case, feelings of dread, horror, repulsion and distress.

Freud associated these feelings with certain visual stimuli and narrative techniques that blurred the boundaries between life and death, or animate and inanimate entities. Waxwork dolls, automata, doubles, severed limbs, ghosts, mirrors, madness, and familiar settings like the home were some of his compelling examples. The ambiguity of these subjects would go on to inspire painters, photographers, designers, sculptors, directors and animators.

Dolls and Dead Bodies

When the German artist Otto Dix was relaying the effects of World War I in his satirical drawings, he was interested in portraying the human condition: he showed soldiers on the battlefield, and war heroes returning home. However, these were not images of jubilation. Instead, soldiers were missing body parts and had scarred faces that he replaced with gas masks, metal crutches, eye-patches and prosthetics. What Dix represented was symptomatic of what the world was witnessing for the first time as a result of mechanical warfare and it was an unsettling sight: a hybrid of human and machine to compensate for their mutilated bodies, and men suffering from 'war neuroses' as indicated by the expressions of anguish on their faces. These disturbing images came to light at the same time as Freud's publication of 'The Uncanny' in 1919.



Untitled. Found doll with forks. © Martha Todd, 2013

of uncertainty. The eyes of the pieces are all important; an unsettling connection between onlooker and subject, they stare back at the viewer demanding an emotional response.

The doll enables play, a way that a child can replicate and relive the home and the family. Freud spoke of how the uncanny "(das unheimliche, the unhomely)" is some way a species of the familiar (das Heimlich, 'the homely)'). The homely unable to exist without the unhomely, the two invariably intertwined. 'Hand (Best Dressed)' has a cast of every digit of my hand for limbs, the face distorted when it was ripped from the mould during the making. The making and maker exposed. By uncovering the making process I am exposing "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away". Her mirrored, gold lustre eyes ensure the viewer is confronted with their reflection to see their own response to this 'home-maker'.

My found and altered dolls, offer a story. The weathered nature of the dolls, their amended limbs and awkward positions push the viewer to consider the history of the doll. The notion of a toy that has experienced life traumas disturbs. This representation of an innocent newly born child has a dark story to tell. Not so much a 'return of the repressed' but an index of repression.

'Love Funnel Deluxe' was originally produced for an exhibition about sex and death. An almost literal translation of the theme, the piece playfully suggests role play, sex play and the possibility of suffocation. The cast courgette, undoubtedly phallic, yet an everyday, homely object is strapped to a gas mask - referencing fear of contamination and possibilities of death. The homely entwined with the unhomely - the 'heimlich' with the 'unheimlich'.

'Finger Bowl' is a personal piece. I spent much of my time as a mannequin maker, casting the hands of models, which I would turn into perfectly pristine simulations of hands. Wrinkles and creases were removed, skin texture polished

away. This piece celebrates the cherished moments of this task; the demoulding of the hand. The point when the true reflection of the subject cast is exposed. The broken fingers are slip-cast in porcelain giving them a preciousness. The casts are of my own fingers; offering myself as two parts, the artist and the factory worker, the homely and the unhomely, both intertwined; the one unable to exist without the other.



Hand (Best Dressed), © Martha Todd 2012

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Compiled by Ivan Ward

Freud and The Uncanny

At the beginning of his essay Freud claims that he is insensitive to feelings of the uncanny, yet many of his examples are derived from his own experience. He also insists on a psychoanalytic method in which the researcher of a particular human experience must 'awaken in himself the possibility of feeling it'. In effect the psychoanalytic investigator must tune in to the object of study and become one with it.

The selection of quotations that follows in this chapter has been arranged into themes. The quotations begin with Freud's understanding of aesthetics and research methodology before turning to the personal experiences that are recounted in his text.

Quotations are all taken from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, edited and translated by James Strachey. Some of the texts have been edited very lightly to aid readability.

Psychoanalytic Aesthetics

'It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling [...] But it does occasionally happen that he has to interest himself in some particular province of that subject; and this province usually proves to be a rather remote one, and one which has been neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics.

The subject of the "uncanny" is a province of this kind [...] As good as nothing is to be found upon this subject in comprehensive treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime—that is, with feelings of a positive nature—and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress.' (p.219)

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The Freud Museum London

The Freud Museum London was the final home of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and his daughter Anna, pioneer of child psychoanalysis. It was here at 20 Maresfield Gardens that the Freud family settled in 1938 after escaping from Nazi persecution in Austria.

The Museum houses Sigmund Freud's library, personal papers and his collection of antiquities. The centrepiece of the house is Freud's study. Here, among the book-lined walls and classical objects, you will find his original and now iconic psychoanalytic couch.

The Education Service offers tailored programmes for groups from schools and universities and adult learners. Students can experience the atmosphere of Freud's study and discuss his life and work at times when the Museum is closed to the public.

The Museum has a regular programme of exhibitions, including by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Alice Anderson and Mark Wallinger. The Museum also runs a lively and varied programme of talks, classes, performances and conferences exploring the history of psychoanalysis and its impact on contemporary culture.

The Museum also holds a substantial archive, reference library and photo library. Research is free of charge and by appointment.

Further information and booking details at www.freud.org.uk

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Sigmund Freud's paper 'The Uncanny' (1919), outlines his theory that went on to inspire art, film, literature and further psychoanalytic enquiry. The uncanny is a feeling that is difficult to describe. It is related to dread, horror, repulsion and distress. Examples of situations that can provoke an uncanny feeling include inanimate objects coming alive, thoughts appearing to have an effect in the real world, seeing your double (the doppelgänger effect), representations of death such as ghosts or spirits, and involuntary repetitions.

Some people are more susceptible to the effects of the uncanny but everyone has experienced it at one time or another.

This catalogue brings together essays considering Freud's 'The Uncanny' from a range of perspectives, accompanying the exhibition *The Uncanny: A Centenary* at the Freud Museum London.