

German Psychoanalytic Association Spring Conference in Bremen, Germany, 1st to 4th of May 2019

presence of the uncanny – uncanny present times

clinical, aesthetic, and social perspectives 100 years after Freud

As Freud's ›The Uncanny‹ will have its centenary next year, we dedicate our coming semi-annual conference to this concept, examining its actual significance according to clinical, cultural, aesthetic, and social perspectives.

When Freud conceived the phenomenon psychoanalytically in his outstanding study on ›The Uncanny‹, he tied it firmly to repression and characterized it as the reactionary affect on the return of the repressed, namely the castration complex. This was elaborated especially in his controversial interpretation of the Sandman by E.T.A. Hoffmann. For a long time since 1919 there was – with the exception of Lacan – not much talking about the Uncanny, and Freud's paper seemed to be relegated to a niche existence. This only changed in the course of a veritable boom of the concept, not only in the arts and cultural studies since the 1980s and 90s, but also in recent psychoanalytical concepts taking now into account a widened theoretical scope.

Various, psychoanalysts approaching uncanniness deal with a challenging and disconcerting disintegration of natural boundaries, forms or categories of perception – with respect to clinical as well as to aesthetical perspectives. What was previously reliably separated now seems to blur: this regards the self and object, the inside and outside, the present and past as well as other contours. Consequently, connected feelings of identity are shaking. This conceptualization essentially pursues the argument made by Ernst Jentsch, which Freud himself vehemently rejected, but could not get rid of.

So far, especially Lacanian contributions have referred to spatiality – this aspect was also elaborated thoroughly by Freud in his etymological analysis of ›unheimlich‹. In countless examples of literary or cinematic shudder the horror of the uncanny takes place as the depiction of haunted places. Can this topos of a shocking alienation of the familiar be transferred to inner psychic spaces being suddenly pervaded by unsymbolized elements? Or in other words – is the uncanny evocation of the non-identical not particularly unsettling when regarding how the psychic space of the subject is fabricated? The subject's question with respect to the uncanny would then be: ›where am I here?‹, if a space is involved, or – on the contrary – a non-space.

On the one hand, dealing with the uncanny one runs the risk of losing oneself within a vast variety of singular phenomena and examples; on the other hand, there is the danger of limiting oneself too quickly to issues of the foreign, in the sense of transcultural aspects. Hence, it might be even more important to put strong emphasis on those clinical aspects coming along with uncanny experiences in the consulting room – the part of the patient as well as of the analyst.

Clinical phenomena of the uncanny could – for example – be characterized as moments of ambivalence between feeling alive and dead, presence and absence, Me and not-Me, or self and object. Often, it's about intense situations hardly being thought of, felt, or put into words. They're like a split or a gap – a non-space. We know by now, that analyses live by such moments, that render some space to the unthinkable, allowing experiences including instants of ambivalence when it's not clear, who is subject and who is object, who projects and who identifies, who desires, or, more generally, how the connection within that somehow shaking room is. Such uncanny moments can at the same time be restructuring experiences. But, does uncanniness go along with *all* such restructuring moments? And what distinguishes scary from uncanny moments?

Subsequent to Freud and his text, we hold it as equally important to examine the experience of the uncanny according to its aesthetical aspects and to establish intertextual relations between clinical and cultural contexts. Simply the spatial arrangement of our analytic offices including the couch and the analyst's chair in the background can evoke an aesthetic experience, being associated, by patients, with the uncanny.

In addition to three keynotes (Charles Mendes de Leon, Switzerland, Philipp Soldt, Bremen, and Raymond Borens, Switzerland) which will deal with major theoretical-conceptual, clinical, and aesthetical aspects of the uncanny, the main ›corpus‹ of the conference will be composed of thematic panels inviting in each case two contributors and leaving much space for discussion. The wide range of issues comprises such as: psychotic transference; analytic work with Salafist or neo-Nazi extremists; psychoanalytic movie interpretation; transgenerational transmission of trauma; uncanny aspects of technologies and media; myth, romanticism, and enlightenment; perversion and sexualities; to give the major topics.