

Introduction

Imperfection is, paradoxically, a guarantee for survival.

(Todorov 1980, 23)

1.1. A Genealogy of the Uncanny

In 1965, professor Siegbert S. Praver concluded his inaugural lecture at Westfield College, London entitled "The 'Uncanny' in Literature. An Apology for its Investigation," with the following words.

I hope to have demonstrated this evening that for all the dangers which attend a too exclusive preoccupation with it, for all the crude and melodramatic and morally questionable forms in which it so often confronts us, the uncanny in literature does speak of something true and important, and that its investigation, therefore is worth our while.
(Praver 1965, 25)

This cautious plea, uttered almost half a century ago, reminds us of how fast things change in a relatively brief period of time. Nowadays, the topic of the uncanny no longer begs for an apology. On the contrary, it is an accepted and popular concept in various disciplines of the humanities, ranging from literature and the arts, to philosophy, film studies, theory of architecture and sociology, and recently even crossing over to the "hard" field of robotics and artificial intelligence.

In the most basic definition, proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1919, the uncanny is the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar.¹ However,

by the time of the first monograph devoted to the subject, Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003), the concept had expanded far beyond this concise definition. Perpetually postponing closure, Royle's uncanny is a general perspective, a style of thinking and writing, of teaching that is synonymous with "deconstruction." The uncanny becomes an insidious, all-pervasive "passe-partout" word to address virtually any topic: politics, history, humanity, technology, psychoanalysis, religion, alongside more familiar aesthetic questions, related to genres, specific literary texts and motifs commonly associated with the uncanny. Because the uncanny affects and haunts everything, it is in constant transformation and cannot be pinned down: "[t]he unfamiliar [. . .] is never fixed, but constantly altering. The uncanny is (the) unsettling (of itself)" (Royle 2003, 5). Royle's understanding of the term places him in a tradition of "uncanny thinking," to paraphrase Samuel Weber, most commonly associated with the works of Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Hélène Cixous, Jean-Michel Rey, Weber, Neil Hertz, Anthony Vidler, Elizabeth Wright, and Julian Wolfreys, to name but a few authors who extensively wrote on the uncanny.

As we will see, this type of thinking fundamentally questions and destabilizes the status and possibility of concepts and the uncanny has become a concept that signals this questioning. However, the present study also shows that this is but one side of the coin. The consequence of Royle's conception of the uncanny as a strategy and attitude of perpetual defamiliarization, deconstruction or "hauntology" is that the teaching practice he envisions and practices is highly individualistic and creative.² As a result *The Uncanny* consists of a horizontal collection of introductions to various subthemes of the uncanny, of different perspectives, of case studies, of essays, and of pieces of creative writings held or glued together by the signifier uncanny.³ The fact that Praver's apology is not listed in Royle's impressive bibliography cannot be considered as a flaw: Royle's book does not want to offer a systematic history of the uncanny, even if it accumulates a wealth of information, especially about the development of the uncanny in the last decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, it is unlikely that the name Praver will ring a bell among contemporary scholars working on or interested in the uncanny, even if his extensive work on the uncanny was in many ways ahead of its time. His words remind us that the rise of the concept in different disciplines of the humanities is not a tale of straightforward ascent to conceptual clarity and complexity.

Praver's apology is part of the genealogy of the uncanny, which is the topic of the present study. In accordance with Michel Foucault's

methodological conception of genealogy (1977 and 1979), a conceptual genealogy is not simply a historical account that describes the teleological development from origin to final concept, a history of ideas. Instead, it is a dynamic mapping of the processes of conceptualization—an oscillation between contingent and motivated transitions, based on material traces of conceptual awareness found in various types of discourse. A genealogical perspective also tries to understand why the uncanny's conceptual structure and content are not clear-cut. Thus, although it is by no means blind to the internal ambiguities of the uncanny as a concept, a conceptual genealogy nonetheless aims at a bigger, more distanced picture of the position and function of the concept as it travels between disciplines and decades.

Constructing or mapping a genealogy of the uncanny is not an easy task. One reason for this is that the uncanny is still a young concept compared to other aesthetic concepts, for instance, "the sublime." Although many scholars—such as Prawer, Harold Bloom, Hans-Thies Lehmann, or David Ellison—have argued that the sublime and the uncanny are closely related, there is a huge difference between the two from a discursive point of view. Several theoretical treatises on the sublime are known from the eighteenth and nineteenth century and even earlier (e.g., Longinus, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, etc.). By contrast, a theory of the uncanny before the twentieth century can only resort to the occurrence of the word or to descriptions of the phenomenon in literary texts and artistic sources. The term was not considered as an aesthetic category and there was no theoretical or philosophical discourse before the twentieth century. As Martin Jay puts it in "The Uncanny Nineties": "by common consent, the theoretical explanation for the current fascination with the concept is Freud's 1919 essay, 'The Uncanny'" (Jay 1998, 157).

Indeed, it was Freud who raised the phenomenon and the word "*unheimlich*" to the status of a concept in the foundational essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche") (Freud 1919h). At the end of the twentieth century, this rather short treatise had outgrown "its marginal position in the Freudian canon" (Ellison 2001, 52) and is now regarded as a central text for Freudian aesthetics.⁴ In recent years several scholars have tried to demonstrate that Freud's essay is not the actual origin of the conceptualization by drawing attention to earlier studies by the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, the philosopher Friedrich Schelling (both cited by Freud), or the theologian Rudolf Otto, to name a few. Yet, despite this, Freud's essay "The Uncanny" remains the primary focus of attraction in the continuing fascination with the uncanny in culture and theory alike.

In other words, Freud remains “the founder of discourse” in the Foucauldian sense of the term because subsequent theorists have not superseded his centrality in the debate. (See Masschelein 2002, 65–66 and Royle 2003, 14.) At the same time, however, the uncanny in contemporary discourse has exceeded the boundaries of a strict psychoanalytic framework. Even if the uncanny is the Freudian uncanny, it can no longer be considered a psychoanalytic concept and one may even wonder whether this was ever the case. A careful examination of the word uncanny in Freud’s oeuvre reveals that while the essay appeared at a turning point in Freud’s thinking, it by no means occupied a central position, and it is doubtful that the uncanny actually enjoyed a significant conceptual status in Freud’s theory. To go even further, none of the “original” conceptual gestures—Freud’s included—were strong enough to immediately set off the conceptualization process. In fact, the concept of the uncanny has only really been picked up in the last three decades of the twentieth century, when Freud’s 1919 essay on the topic was widely discovered, primarily in French and in Anglo-Saxon theory and literary criticism. This brings us to the central thesis of this book, namely that *the Freudian uncanny is a late-twentieth century theoretical concept*.

1.2. Different Stages in the Conceptualization of the Uncanny

After Freud’s discovery and creation of the concept in 1919, there is a fairly long period of conceptual latency or preconceptualization until the mid-1960s. The interest in the uncanny in this period is limited to isolated and dispersed interventions, whose influence on the later conceptualization can be gauged only indirectly. This changes in the 1970–1980s, which is the actual conceptualization phase of the uncanny, marked by explicit conceptual awareness as well as by numerous in-depth readings of Freud’s essay from various perspectives. Several authors (re)discover Freud’s text more or less simultaneously, often independently of each other, and as a rule, they reflect on this discovery explicitly, for instance by emphasizing the marginal position of the essay or by questioning the status of the concept.⁵ In this period, the concept of the uncanny undergoes significant changes. Theoretically, new meanings are introduced that thicken the conceptual tissue. Practically, the uncanny is lastingly associated with a specific kind of corpus, various types of narratives and motifs, and with a method of reading.

Factors contributing to the sudden attention to “The Uncanny” in this era are manifold. Within deconstruction, there is a preference for marginal texts. The rise of “Theory” in the wake of phenomenology, structuralism and poststructuralism, and hermeneutics calls for fresh concepts that function in a way that is different from “ordinary” theoretical concepts.⁶ Among the first to draw attention to the metaphorical nature of “scientific” concepts, using the uncanny and other psychoanalytic concepts as primary examples, are Rey, Claudine Normand, and Neil Hertz. According to the linguist Normand, psychoanalytic concepts can serve as models for a new science in which theory and practice are intertwined. The tension between subjectivity and objectivity can be settled neither in terms of the classical hierarchical opposition of proper/figurative, nor in terms of the traditional scientific ideal of univocal meaning for the opposition between conscious and unconscious allows for the simultaneous existence of ambivalent meanings. Freud’s “theoretical fictions” are metaphors in the strongest sense.⁷ Not just descriptive, they guide the interpretation and perception of reality, and they produce effects in the psychoanalytic dialogue that exceed any conceptual definition.⁸

In this period, discursive shifts also lead to semantic exchanges of the Freudian uncanny with related aesthetic and philosophic notions such as the sublime, the fantastic, and alienation. Certain semantic kernels in Freud’s elaboration of the uncanny—e.g., uncertainty, ambivalence, doubling, and the opposition between Eros and the death drives—are foregrounded to make it especially suitable for a contemporary theory and epistemology of fiction. Last but certainly not least, the concept of the uncanny is relevant in the emergent post- or neo-romantic cultural climate, both in the arts and in popular culture. After the upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s, a renewed focus fell on the intimate and subjective experience. Followed by the bleaker political climate and the economic crisis of the 1980s, this experience is tinged by a deep-rooted sense of estrangement, unrest and (paranoid) anxiety, and by the acute awareness of the challenges posed by a rapidly evolving, globalized, increasingly virtual late-capitalist society: the nuclear threat and the Cold War, terrorism, nationalism, immigration and xenophobia, individualism, and the omnipresence of image and simulacra, etc. The concept of the uncanny at the same time addresses abstract theoretical concerns, the postromantic and neo-Gothic aesthetics, and the sociopolitical climate of the mediatized postindustrial Western society.

In the 1990s the concept of the uncanny stabilizes and expands. This is the phase of canonization and dissemination. The concept of the uncanny is now generally acknowledged as a concept. Freud's essay moves to a central position in the Freudian canon, and the uncanny appears as a keyword in a number of specialized lexica and vocabularies. There is a consensus about the origin of the term (Freud) and about its primary semantic cores. At the same time, the concept branches out from its source domains—psychoanalysis, "Theory" (or continental, poststructuralist philosophy and literary theory), and genre studies—to a variety of other fields: art history, film studies, architecture theory, postcolonial studies, sociology, anthropology, and the study of religion. Each new use adds to the conceptual substance of the uncanny. Moreover, at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the Freudian uncanny leaps from the domain of criticism back into the domain of art, where it influences the visual arts as well as fiction. A crucial question arises here: how can the uncanny as a code, both for the artist and for the audience, still produce the unexpected, wild, undomesticated quality of the uncanny? At the onset of the twenty-first century, two publications with the same title demonstrate the entanglement between theory, criticism, and art: as already mentioned, Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003) and Mike Kelley's hefty catalogue *The Uncanny* (2004), published on the occasion of his exhibition in the Tate Gallery Liverpool. Both projects are devoted to the concept of the uncanny and provide a substantial introduction to its discourse. Moreover, they bring together significant widespread tendencies in the discourse on the uncanny including its links with a theoretical, critical, and creative practice—Royle predominantly in the field of literature, theory, and popular culture, Kelley for the visual arts.

The present study will not, however, focus on the heyday of the uncanny, roughly the period between 1980 and 2000, because this has been well documented. Instead, in order to study the conceptualization process as a whole, we will zoom in on the early preconceptual stages that lead up to the actual conceptualization. A close examination of the ways in which the uncanny developed in this early period, concentrating on semantic shifts and conceptual persona that were introduced in the process, including now forgotten and therefore unsuccessful ones, reveals how a breeding ground was established that allowed for the eventual conceptualization of the uncanny as we are familiar with it today. Because it is a young concept, the uncanny is still unstable and even sometimes flimsy as some critics have pointed out.⁹ Looking at the genealogy of the concept reveals on the one hand the actual richness

and critical potential that exceeds its definitions. On the other hand, the concept's slips and oscillations, the in-betweens and dead-ends of its development in a living critical practice also become apparent. It is this trajectory that constitutes the interest of the uncanny as a concept because it reveals how an aesthetic concept always exceeds the boundaries that are established in its elaboration.

1.3. The Uncanny as Unconcept

Conceptualization is never just the work of one or more persons. It entails a kind of creative energy that circulates and momentarily converges and crystallizes over various decades and national traditions. The discourse on the uncanny, within psychoanalysis and in other disciplines, has been uniquely characterized by a meta- or self-reflexive concern with concepts. Elsewhere, I have discussed how different aspects of this concern coincide with different moments of conceptualization: an awareness of the act and necessity of creating concepts, a striving for consensus and conceptual stability, different forms of critique, and finally, the transmission or pedagogy of the concept (Masschelein 2002). Rather than mutually exclusive or successive phases, these aspects must be regarded as recurring moments of conceptualization that continue to interact throughout the process, keeping the concept vital and productive.

Like other Freudian concepts, the uncanny is a lexical concept, i.e., it is borrowed from natural language. Although Freud and numerous scholars after him have stressed that the German word "unheimlich" is untranslatable qua form and content, more or less the same feeling can be expressed by words such as "creepy," "eerie," "weird," or the more common French term "*insolite*" instead of the wordy official translation *inquiétante étrangeté*. Affects are, as Freud points out, highly subjective, but they are also objective in the sense that they are recognizable across different cultures and ages, independent of the words used to categorize them. Likewise, the theoretical concept of "the uncanny" refers to a construct or compound of ideas that is not necessarily limited to the word. For instance, in the 1990s, when Marxist theory was in decline—partly due to political events like the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—the concept of the uncanny was used interchangeably with alienation, estrangement, and defamiliarization, concepts that played a crucial role in critical and aesthetic theory in the first half of the twentieth century. In other discourses, the uncanny becomes a synonym for the disruptive powers of fiction, especially in

relation to knowledge and by extension, philosophy, or what is now called "Theory." In other cases, the uncanny signifies the secularized or negative sublime. Still, the specific conceptualization of the uncanny is also very much anchored to the word; as we will see, it is the signifier that holds the diverging semantic trajectories together. Moreover, the specificity of the concept of the uncanny is linked to certain linguistic features. Freud was the first to draw attention to the lexical ambivalence of the word: "unheimlich" is the negation of "heimlich" in the sense of "familiar, homely," but it also coincides with the second meaning of "heimlich," "hidden, furtive." From a psychoanalytic point of view, this ambivalence is not extraordinary. The prefix "un-" is not merely a linguistic negation, it is the "token of repression." This entails that the uncanny is marked by the unconscious that does not know negation or contradiction; even when something is negated, it still remains present in the unconscious. According to this reasoning, the contradiction resulting from negation is not exclusive or binary: denying something at the same time conjures it up. Hence, it is perfectly possible that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

Like the concept of the unconscious itself, the uncanny as a negative concept can be regarded as a *mise-en-abyme* for the logic of Freudianism, which in the last decades of the twentieth century will be presented as a critique of scientific rationalism, the suppositions of the Enlightenment project, and an alternative to the exclusive binary logics of "either/or" that must be transformed in the open-ended deconstructive "neither/nor" or, more affirmatively, in the plurality of "and/and." This new way of thinking is engrained both in the conceptual content of the uncanny and in the way in which the uncanny functions in discourse: often questioned and criticized, the uncanny has undeniably become a prominent concept in a wide variety of cultural discourses. For this movement to come about, however, shifts in the concept had to occur. For instance, it was necessary to split the conceptual persona of Freud into various roles: the old-fashioned male chauvinist scientist versus the visionary writer—as Bloom put it, the only twentieth-century poet of the sublime—who intuited, partly in spite of himself, a revolutionary new way of thinking that awaits disclosure and that has the possibility to infect and undermine old ways of thinking.

Aside from its lexical ambivalence, the second linguistic feature of the uncanny is its function as a substantivized adjective. This grammatical form denotes openness and indefiniteness, as opposed to the substantive "uncanniness" or "*Unheimlichkeit*" (a term often

found in Heideggerian discourse) that indicates a state or an essence. The substantivized adjective is a common lexical form for aesthetic concepts, such as the sublime, the beautiful, the grotesque, the gothic, which are according to Freud “affects.” It is useful here to distinguish between the psychological notion of affect (feeling or emotion) linked to a subject, and affect as aesthetic category. This can be defined as the effect of the confrontation with a work of art. The distinction between affect and aesthetic concept has been elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (1996) where they examine three types of thinking: philosophy, science, and art.

Genuine creative thinking—as opposed to the opinions or *doxa* prevalent in the media for instance, which merely try to cover up the chaos—is a way of mapping chaos, or of turning chaos into a “plane” or domain. In order to accomplish this, philosophy, science, and art use fundamentally different tools as they lay out different planes. Philosophy operates on the plane of immanence by creating concepts. These are abstract mental objects that are nonetheless material and possess a certain substance. Concepts are inherently dynamic and ever-changing. They have to be continually recreated in thought in order to remain alive (i.e., directed toward becoming). Concepts are not created by philosophers but by “conceptual personae,” i.e., the agents who put forth precepts that become concepts in a process of institutionalization, canonization, and pedagogy.¹⁰ Art is another way of thinking that lays out a plane of composition onto the material (language, sound, stone, canvas . . .). It creates percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations. These are the concrete but impersonal results of perceptions, feelings, and sensations materialised in the work of art, independent of artist, character, or public. The percepts and affects of aesthetic figures are radically distinct from perceptions or affectations of a subject.¹¹ The artwork embodies affects and precepts that are past as well as eternally present and that can be activated or resuscitated as an event. Thus, the affect exceeds the material limits of the artistic creation and resonates with the infinite chaos from which it arises.

Despite their specificity and autonomy, the activities of philosophy, art, and science do “join up in the brain,” creating interferences between different types of thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 216). Extrinsic interferences occur when one discipline looks at another from the perspective of its own plane, for instance, when philosophy tries to make a concept of a sensation or when art creates sensations of concepts. This is what happened when Freud created the concept of the affect of the uncanny, especially in his reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s

novella "The Sandman." He reads a literary text looking for conceptual value and thereby elevates an aesthetic figure, Hoffmann, to the status of conceptual persona: Hoffmann "has succeeded in producing uncanny effects better than anyone else" and he unfailingly points us to the most important causes of the uncanny (Freud 1919h, 227). However, in this extrinsic interference, the domains of psychoanalysis and literature do not really mix.

When elements or agents slip from one plane onto another and become indistinguishable, for example, when concepts and conceptual personae slide from the plane of immanence (i.e., philosophy) onto the plane of composition (i.e., art), intrinsic interferences occur in which the two planes cannot easily be disentangled. In the genealogy of the uncanny, we can observe how at a specific moment in time Freud as a conceptual persona—the psychoanalyst who often stages dialogues in his texts—is turned into an aesthetic or even comic figure. His personal traits and affects, like intellectual uncertainty, seduction, or naïve rationalism, are highlighted in many critical-creative readings of "The Uncanny" that stress the interrelation between literature and theory. Cixous's "Fiction and its Phantoms," which is extensively analyzed in chapter 4, is a prototype for this "double reading" that sets out to create an affect of the Freudian concept of the uncanny by reading the essay not as a scientific essay but as a literary text, focusing specifically on Freud as an aesthetic figure. In another turn of the screw, Freud subsequently becomes a new conceptual persona: the advocate of a new kind of thinking that can be called "Freudianism" and the affect of the uncanny is conceptualized as an effect produced by reading fiction, with serious implications for theory as well, even in domains that seem far removed from literature, like sociology (Gordon (1997) 2008).

The third kind of interference has to do with the reference of each kind of thinking to its negative or to its "No." In Deleuze and Guattari's view, this is where thinking touches chaos, not in a dialectical sense, but as a constant centrifugal or deterritorialising reference.

Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs nonart and science needs nonscience. They do not need the No as beginning, or as the end in which they would be called upon to disappear by being realized, but at every moment of their becoming or their development. (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 218)

The permanent contact of forms of knowledge with their negative constitutes chaos, which for Deleuze and Guattari represents the most enigmatic type of interference between the three planes because it cannot be described in terms of what is known. What is extracted or summoned forth by art, philosophy, and science in a truly creative act always precariously balances on the edge of nothing or the unknown. The recognisable shapes of concept, function, and affect emanate from the undifferentiated shadow or chaos that remains their common denominator, "as if they shared the same shadow that extends itself across their different nature and constantly accompanies them" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 218).

The dynamics of art, philosophy, and science are the point where thinking comes to life in a process of renewal and growth, but also of failure. The genealogy of the uncanny that will be unfolded in the following pages is therefore also to be understood in a Deleuzian sense. Throughout, it aims to render a sense of being in touch with "nonthinking." Every successful conceptualization of the uncanny is doubled and also determined by failing conceptualizations. Different conceptual cores come to the fore, while others retreat into the background, only sometimes to suddenly appear again in a different form. In this sense, the term "unconcept" exceeds the unconscious dynamics of repression and the return of the repressed, which are pivotal to the psychoanalytic conceptualization of the term.¹² It also serves as a reminder of the concept's peculiar location "in between" or "on the verge": on the verge of sliding from the plane of immanence onto the plane of composition and vice versa, on the verge between concept and affect, and on the verge of no longer being a concept, of dissipating again into chaos or into *doxa* and emerging from it in unexpected ways.

1.4. A Functionalist-Discursive Perspective

A genealogy is based on the study of the traces of conceptualization in discourse. These traces can be understood as the heterogeneous sum of concrete signs of the construction, awareness, and questioning of concepts found in texts. This is a functionalist rather than an essentialist starting point because it concerns the way the uncanny functions in various discourses. Moreover, instead of trying to come up with a conclusive definition or an origin of the uncanny, this type of research is interested in the dynamics and trajectories of conceptualization,

including the successes and failures of conceptualization. In this particular case, it means exploring the tension between canonization and instability that constitutes an important part of the concept of the Freudian uncanny. The aim is to map the rich and chaotic material without losing track of the dynamics and the irregularity of the ongoing process of conceptualization. In order to do this, the research relies on a broad, representative archive of sources that is comparative (English, French, German, and Dutch) and interdisciplinary, gathered according to strict procedures that will be outlined below. The results of this work not only apply to the uncanny in particular; they may also bear on the status of aesthetic concepts in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, the age of Theory and Post-Theory. Furthermore, they question the way in which research is conducted in this electronic age and the effects of this on the knowledge we produce and construct.

Underlying all this is the methodological assumption that a genealogy must be based on a broad corpus that includes as many material traces of conceptualization as possible, regardless of their apparent historical or semantic priority or relevance. The corpus is compiled by combining a strict formal procedure with an openness toward the material. The formal point of departure in this study is the occurrence of "unheimlich" and its translations: "uncanny," "unhomely," and "inquiétante étrangeté." This adherence to the signifier can be regarded as an intensification of the way in which researches are ordinarily conducted since the popularization of search engines. A first step is to run the search terms through a large number of indexes and search engines, paper and electronic, academic and more general. In the 1990s, the search term "uncanny" in electronic searches invariably pointed to "The Uncanny X-Men," a popular comic series. However, combining the keywords "uncanny/unheimlich + Freud" to a large extent excluded these ordinary uses of uncanny. Nowadays, the Freudian uncanny comes up first and in the last decades of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century the key word "uncanny" leads to an explosive number of sources.

However, this method is not foolproof. Despite their utopian promise of immediate access to universal knowledge, search engines like Google, as well as more academic ones like the MLA Index of Periodicals, Arts and Humanities Citations Index, Francis, Project Muse, PsychInfo, Philosopher's Index, Web of Science . . . to name a few, are obviously limited by all kind of factors and must be supplemented by the old-fashioned library and archive.¹³ Following the lead of citations and manually going through books and journals resulted in a fairly

large and heterogeneous corpus of all kinds of texts, written from 1919 until the beginning of 2000, that has been regularly updated until 2009. Moreover, focusing on the Freudian uncanny also excludes other uses of the word that occurred independently of Freud, for instance by the theologian Otto or philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Friedrich Nietzsche. This lacuna was compensated for by scanning indexes for these authors, focusing on the occurrence of the word in their work. This double-check in most cases confirmed that “unheimlich” in the work of most of these thinkers—with the notable exception of Otto—has been discovered in the wake of the Freudian uncanny.

Only after one becomes acquainted with the conceptual value of “uncanny” the word begins to stand out in other contexts. This phenomenon is what will be called “stickiness” or “viscosity” (of the signifier). Stickiness runs through this book as a vague yet material metaphor to indicate the subterranean factors at work in conceptualization, both on an individual and an inter-subjective level. Although a word and a concept are not the same thing, from a functionalist perspective the word “uncanny” holds together the conceptual tissue; it forms a cluster of heterogeneous conceptual elements like a Band-Aid or adhesive tape. Moreover the stickiness of the word also attracts new associations and variations that are by no means always motivated by conscious or deliberate moves, and these ensure the dynamism of the concept. A few brief examples can illustrate this. As will be shown in Chapter 2, in various indexes to Freud’s oeuvre the keyword “uncanny” leads to divergent, sometimes inconsistent sources. This disparateness casts doubt on the conceptual value and position of the uncanny in Freud’s work, but at the same time the word uncanny also inspired later critics to establish new, sometimes idiosyncratic connections within Freud’s oeuvre, while other, more obvious links remain curiously underexamined. As Wolfreys pointed out, words that were virtually ignored can suddenly become significant and important. Moreover, the marginal position of the essay in Freud’s oeuvre facilitated its isolation or detachment from the theoretical framework in which it is embedded. In Chapter 4 we will see how in the 1970s and 1980s, the Freudian uncanny became tangled up with Tzvetan Todorov’s structuralist genre categories of *l’étrange* (literally: the strange) and *le fantastique* (the fantastic) through the English and German translations of Todorov’s work. Thirdly, it is remarkable that many English and French texts use the original German word “unheimlich” rather than its translation (often in grammatically incorrect ways) in order to pun on the root “*Heim*/home,” leading to the alternative concept

“unhomely” in architecture and postcolonial theory. This fetishistic attachment to the signifier again reveals the complex relation between word and concept that underlies many etymological inquiries, not in the least Freud’s extensive research on the lexical ambivalence of the word in “The Uncanny.”

Foregrounding these mechanisms results in a view of conceptualization that takes into account coincidences, fruitful misreadings, strategic but not always logical associations, and puns. The rise of a concept is not just a chronological succession of creative acts; it is the result of a double movement. On the one hand, associations and links can narrow down and focus the concept’s radius (territorialization in Deleuzian terms), which result in a vertical conceptualization that aims at an essence or core contained in a definition and achieved through processes of filtering and reducing meanings. On the other hand, they also expand in a horizontal, rhizomatic network of sidetracks and creative new applications of the concept (deterritorialization) in which associative patterns proliferate. This double movement is typical for the domain in which the uncanny functions as an unconcept, i.e., “Theory.” As a concept that at the same time signifies its opposite, as a theoretical fiction as well as a flimsy label, the uncanny’s operation is often determined by a style characterized by playing and punning on the literal and figurative meaning of “unheimlich,” allusions to specific passages and phrases from “The Uncanny,” frequent use of parody and metaphorical and metonymic displacement. This is in accordance with Jean-Michel Rabaté’s description of “Theory” in *The Future of Theory* as a postromantic and postmodern phenomenon in which personal style is extremely important. Theory is a complex mixture of a genuine passion for thinking, opportunistic institutional reasoning, and slavish submission to fashionable master thinkers. This may result in an ongoing “procession” of new concepts and signifiers that insures its openness and dynamism, but also risks becoming trivial and meaningless. Theory in this sense is not a solid foundational construction like philosophy but a hybrid genre in which conceptual, historical, creative, and fictional discourses interact.

Although Rabaté sees “Theory” as a cyclical phenomenon, others have argued that the heyday of this hybrid form can be situated around the 1970s and 1980s, the period in which the concept of the uncanny also materializes.¹⁴ At the same time, the conceptualization and dissemination of the uncanny also coincides with the rise of the Internet. Since the late 1990s, keyword-based research not only provides easy access to an growing number of sources but also greatly

facilitates stickiness because it is based primarily on keywords.¹⁵ Because of the way in which we nowadays search for information, jumping from link to link, our concepts are not just in theory but also in practice more flexible and open-ended. They can easily travel between different fields and topics by association. At the same time, however, this type of concept also shows a hollowness at the core. Because its structure can never be entirely articulated, a concept like the uncanny also remains precarious and subject to fashion.

1.5. (Re)Constructing a Map of Conceptualizations

The organization of the material in this book is largely chronological. The second chapter returns to (and destabilizes) the “origin” of the concept, not by offering another reading of Freud’s “The Uncanny,” but by situating the essay in Freud’s thought as a whole. The focus lies on those areas where the uncanny surfaces in a conceptual sense in order to determine to what extent the uncanny is a concept in Freud’s work. Chapter 3 examines the phase of “preconceptualization” in the first writings on the uncanny within psychoanalysis and within literary criticism and theory in the period between 1919 and 1970. These first applications and elaborations of the concept have been largely forgotten in the later conceptualizations, but although their influence on the conceptualization process can only be gauged indirectly, a number of shifts introduced in this period are nonetheless crucial for the subsequent conceptualization of the uncanny. Chapter 4 zooms in on the turning point in the conceptualization process of the uncanny with a detailed analysis of three determining discursive events that occurred around 1970, namely Derrida’s “The Double Session,” Todorov’s *The Fantastic*, and Cixous’s “Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (“The ‘Uncanny’”).” In two complementary discursive and rhetorical readings of Todorov and Cixous, the complexity of the conceptualization process and its shadow-history is cast in a different light. Belatedly, one can see how the singular events of Derrida, Todorov, and Cixous intertwined to push the uncanny to the fore as a concept and paved the way for its canonization by bringing the uncanny in close proximity with other concepts and a corpus of literary texts, by creating new conceptual personae and by introducing styles that have become connected with the concept of the uncanny. Chapter 5, finally, enlarges the scope to a broad encyclopaedic outline of the later evolutions of the uncanny.

It focuses on its canonization and dissemination, on its relations with neighbouring concepts and different fields, and finally on its place within the arts and popular culture.

The discursive mapping of the corpus material is neither a mere formal reconstruction, nor a “map of misreading” in the Bloomian sense of a battle of “strong” and “weak” conceptual uses. In the material dealing with the uncanny, a number of crosscuts are made and integrated in a chronological, historical framework that includes more general institutional circumstances (e.g., journals or academic traditions) in which texts or statements have been produced. This institutional and intellectual background is supplemented by detailed readings of key texts as singular discursive events that represent views voiced at a particular space, in a given moment and sociocultural climate. Between these views or conceptions there may be contact, as is clear in cases of overt influences or debate, but this is not necessarily so. The conceptual map is not based on the well-known texts on “The Uncanny,” nor does it opt for one clear perspective on the process, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, or (post)structuralist, to name the domains with which the notion is most commonly associated. Instead, all of these as well as other “theoretical” approaches (e.g., systems theory) have inspired this genealogy. As a result, the self-reflexive, metatheoretical dimension of the uncanny continually backfires on this project: the questions that are asked have been dealt with in various ways within the corpus itself.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, making a map is not the same as sketching contours.¹⁶ It means getting out there, into the material itself, and digging one’s hands in. By focusing on the conceptualization of the uncanny in a systematic and constrained way, rather than on individual authors or networks, the aim of this study is to offer momentary freeze-frames of the conceptualization process of the uncanny in its dynamism and its complexity. Hopefully, in going back to the uncanny’s past lives and trajectories, the present study will cast a new light on familiar, contemporary debates and maybe open up avenues for future conceptual research in the humanities.