



The Uncanny City and the Immanence of Crisis: An Arts-Informed Ethnography

Paul Rhodes¹ · Guido Veronese² · Chiara Fiscone²

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Abstract

The Uncanny is a concept famously elaborated by Freud, referring to the experience of unease at suddenly recognising a familiar but unhomely presence in a homely scene, a brief slippage into a more disturbing reality. This paper serves as an art-informed ethnography, exploring the uncanny experience of visiting Florence, a Theme Park City, during a time of international crisis. Drawing on Gale's concept of 'affective presencing,' I develop a series of vignettes accompanied by paintings and sketches, allowing a dialogue to emerge between the city, my co-authors, past residents of Florence, food, songs, film, with a brief counterpoint visit to Berlin. What comes into being is a commentary on horror and beauty, a response that can allow for the recognition of both the dread of what might (be)coming and a resistant commitment to colour, art and belonging.

And the crack in the teacup opens.
A lane to the land of the dead.
—W.H. Auden.

✉ Paul Rhodes
p.rhodes@sydney.edu.au

Guido Veronese
guido.veronese@unimib.it

Chiara Fiscone
chiara.fiscone@gmail.com

¹ The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

² University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

Introduction



Fig. 1 Rhodes, Paul. View From Via Costa dei Magnoli

Five hundred metres from where I am writing is Casa Guidi, the house in Florence where poet Elisabeth Barret Browning (EBB) lived in the mid 19th Century. EBB first positioned herself in the literary establishment as a Christian prophetic-priestess, an identity amplified by the misogyny of literary critics (Hupf, 1995). As a Romantic hero she was still the unfinished Bride of Frankenstein, feared by Victor for her potential autonomy, “*who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.*” (Shelley, 2012, p.144). Hidden beneath the sentimentality of her famous love poem, Sonnet 43, was a dangerous anomaly. She grew, like the Bride to become a feminist icon, recognised as the first feminist poet, an Italian political hero, and a poet-activist against child labour and slavery.

In this paper I wish to explore the psychodynamic concept of the uncanny, not simply its origins with Freud and more contemporary readings but also its utility as a metaphor to interpret our psychological relationship to place. I take Florence as my setting, beautiful, but a simulacrum, a post-modern version of itself, replacing its reality with a representation, a Theme Park City with rides such as the Duomo, properly known as the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, the Uffizi and The Ponte Vecchio (Orr, 2023). The queues are endless and crowds impossible, stripping them of cultural value in favour of the coloured flag of the guide and the fake smiles and selfie poses. As Umberto Eco writes “*the frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth.*” (Eco, 1987, p16). This is written however in a time of international crisis, a month after the second coming of

Trump, with raging genocide in Gaza and wars in Ukraine, Syria and the Sudan and the fear of what is to come. Crisis is a morbid disease where old life-forms are decaying but new ones cannot emerge, an anxious state where the future cannot be seen. I take EBB as my guide, like Dante's Virgil, into the dark wood hoping for answers. In particular, like EBB, I want answers that give me strength and action not simply a focus on the Gothic. The 'dark wood' refers to the drawing by Gustave Doré, one that I have been drawn to through the more challenging phases of my life and which first peaked my interest in Florence. We need to have faith in the journey through the Inferno now more than ever.

The Uncanny

Hush, little baby, don't say a word.
And never mind that noise you heard.
It's just the beasts under your bed.
In your closet, in your head.
Metallica, Enter Sandman (1991).

Freud's essay, *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny) (1919) provides the seminal exploration of the concept, one that was steeped in the literary and artistic period of the time but had not been fully explored philosophically. More than eeriness or creepiness it refers to a feeling that is unsettling but oddly familiar, the sense that something has slipped into consciousness that should never have been revealed, the presence of a foreign body that should not be there, but the recognition that it always has been. For Freud the uncanny related to the return of the repressed, the breaking through of childhood trauma into consciousness. The uncanny serves as a brief crack in the defences symbolised through phantoms, doppelgängers, and mannequins. The uncanny is critical to understanding anxiety, a feeling of losing one's autonomy when an object one is looking at looks back, an impasse that briefly shatters the distinction between the external and internal world (Lacan, 1977). This is Hoffmann's Sandman, stealing the eyes of children and feeding them to his own who live on the moon.

The experience of the uncanny, however, need not be simply an encounter with the gothic, but also an invitation to authenticity. For Heidegger (1962) the fleeting experience of unfamiliarity creates a profound isolation but can also provide an opportunity to live authentically in one's surroundings. A face to face encounter with hidden things means one might be freer from illusions. This will be the eventual objective of this research, to engage in a curiosity about the uncanny to see if some growth is possible.

The most frequent popular setting for the uncanny is arguably the haunted house, a place of welcoming domesticity, haunted by thwarted lives and secret crimes, in basements, attics and hidden behind doors. Simmel (1903), a contemporary of Freud, described the modern city as having a double life, one objective and dominant and the other subjective and unknown. Citizens adapt themselves to the rational structures of the city, focussed on productivity, governed by clocks and money. They maintain an attitude of blasé disillusionment, living in a state of dream-like dissociation, under the veil of respectable appearances, overstimulated but cut off from their emotions (Huskinson, 2021). Meanwhile the uncanny awaits.



Fig. 2 Rhodes, Paul. The Crack

Method

In terms of method the work serves both as a narrative travelogue, an arts-based visual inquiry, and a collaborative auto-ethnography, a third in a series that includes Florence as setting. This method involves writing directly after specific events, using the first person, embodied and emplaced. This is what Gale (2023) calls an act of affective presencing. As he puts it '*sensing that other worldly creatures exist in comings to life in the break-throughs that the madness of the moments can bring, there had been writings about spirits and spirit-ing*' (p.79). Any conceptual connections in the text and the selection of references, poems, lyrics, art works are developed rhizomatically or perhaps Romantically, emerging without planning in a non-linear fashion (Honan & Sellers, 2006). In this paper the collaborative element was the presence of my two Italian friends, which allowed ideas to thicken through dialogue and lines of flight to turn into fully fledged ideas.

On a side note I actually found a plaque in Florence today, commemorating William Denton, one of the champions of Romantic Science. He developed the field of Psychometry, a clairvoyant paleoscience, using objects as mental fossils through which one could gain direct access to the psyches of the past (Fallon, 2023). I felt that this was not a coincidence.

I provide four vignettes written directly after events that occurred between 4 and 19 December, 2024. All the writing was conducted in an apartment at 5 Via Dei Magnoli, 500 m from the Ponte Vecchio. The apartment was set at the top of a steep hill and on the fifth floor above the

rooftops, facing the Uffizi Gallery A variety of venues are featured. The balcony of the apartment itself, the Piazza Michelangelo which looks over the Arno and the Da Bebe restaurant, one of the oldest trattorias in Florence. A weekend trip to Berlin is also included as counterpoint. Vignettes involve dialogue between the author and the city, and the three co-authors, but also many other actors both living and not. Each vignette is supported by two art works, made during this two-week period. One depicts the external landscape of Florence, the majority as seen from different windows of the house, and the other the internal landscape of the artist, myself. In this sense the uncanny has been dismantled, to give equal access to the repressed.

Results

Angst. December 5, 9.07am



Fig. 3 Rhodes, Paul. View from Piazza Michelangelo

I'm sitting at the kitchen table after an early morning walk up to the Piazza Michelangelo and made a quick drawing of the view with kids crayons. The beauty of Florence can be breathtaking, especially today walking back down along Via dell'Erta Canina with its cobble stones and high walls. I stopped at a tabernacle holding images of a small family and read the phrase *O Son O Husband, O Holy Mother, Give us Happiness as We Walk Down This Street*. This is my fourth visit to Florence and this is the kind of joyful moments that have drawn me back, despite the 30 h trip from Sydney. There is tension with my own partner, who is in Berlin and wants me to visit. She finds it hard to understand why I am drawn here, rather than Berlin. She makes sense given

the influence of German expressionism on my own fledgling art career, focussed on internal emotions and horror. I feel like I am beginning to appreciate Freud's emphasis on repetition-compulsion in *The Uncanny*, a cycling of action or thought, an unconscious need to re-enact the unresolved. It reminds me of my patients, from whom I am having a break, who hold unknown traumas, hidden by ritual, including self-harm. If we wait together long enough and create a safe place memories can emerge in a healing way. I am hoping by waiting here in Florence some kind of change can happen to me. For now though I feel an intense dissatisfaction being here, coupled with the beauty of my surroundings, a dissonance that I don't understand. This is my fourth time in Florence and I begin to wonder if I will return.

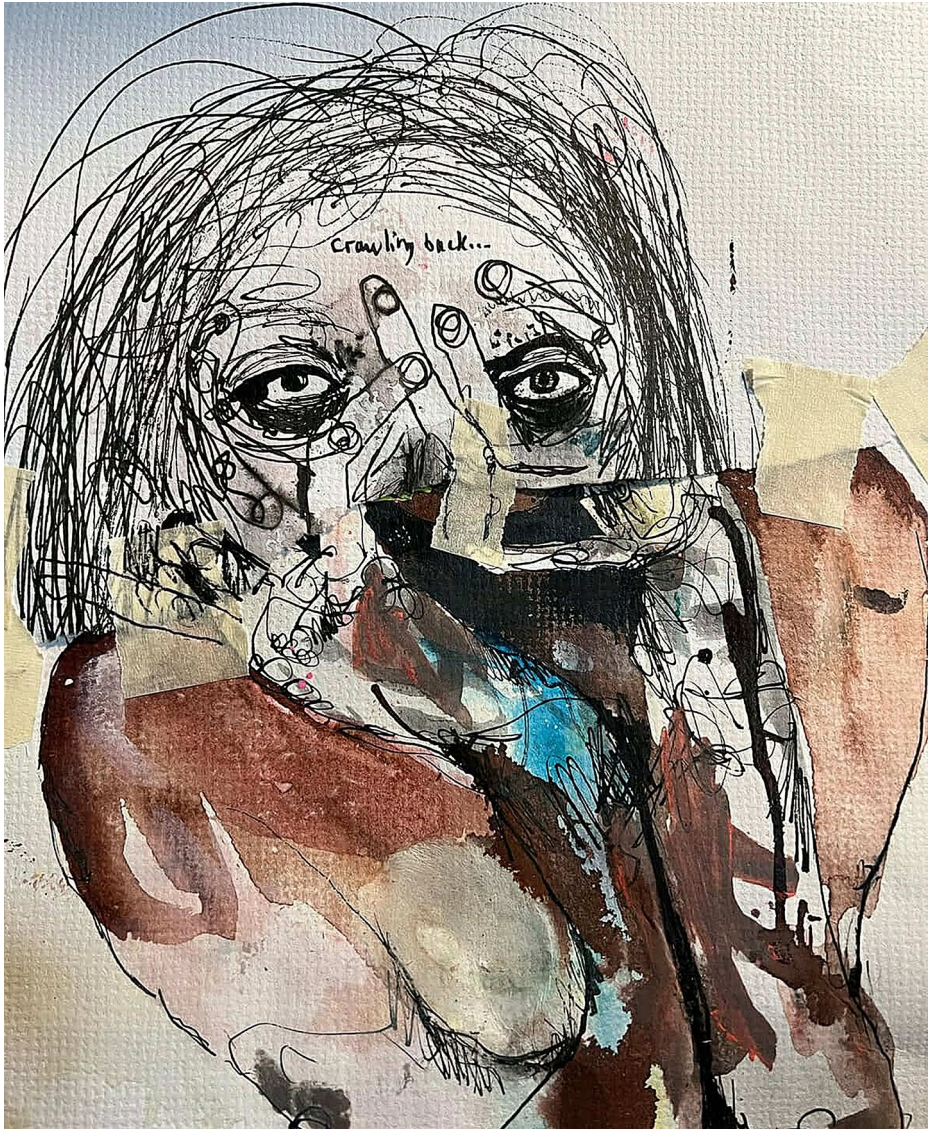


Fig. 4 Rhodes, Paul. Don't Trust Me for a Minute

Death Sandwiches. December 7, 10.33am



Fig. 5 Rooftops from Via Costa dei Magnoli

My friends, Guido and Chiara have arrived from Milan. We share the same disobedience towards mainstream psychology and the same dialogical preferences, meaning I'm hoping to discuss my dissonance with them. We sit on the balcony drinking tea, overlooking the entire view of Florence and it becomes a formidable actor in our conversation. Freud would support the interpretation of our in-joke, Chiara's love of lampredetto, offal sandwiches, which in their beautiful Italian English they call 'interior sandwiches.' What a metaphor!! We laugh our heads off joking that she likes them (she hates them); but death is never far away given their long-term commitment as activists against the war in Gaza. They have many friends who have died. We look out on the beauty of Florence and I begin to feel my attitude changing towards the place; the repetition threatened. I recall yesterday thinking how it provides me with a rest from all the trauma of my work, but I see it now as a dissociation. Lately I've been working with a team who work with criminals who have committed the most heinous crimes. Murders and rapes. Their ghosts are present in my thinking. We discuss, with a feeling of dread, the fascist turn in the world. We look down from our window, like EBB did from hers, a simple domestic scene.



Fig. 6 Rhodes, Paul. Don't Trust Me for a Minute

Montale at Bibe. December 7, 8.30pm



Fig. 7 View From Bellosguardo

Later that day, happier times, as we are joined by another friend, Tomasso, a long term local, who takes us to Da Bibe, a restaurant specialising in rustic Tuscan food. As we enter we see a plaque commemorating the visit of Italy's most revered poet Eugenio Montale, containing this poem he wrote especially in 1937, Bibe at Ponte all'Asse.

Bibe, light guest,
 the dark queen of Sheba.
 pours smiles and Rufina.
 of fourteen degrees.
 Below, one can see the earth glimmering.
 through sparse maples,
 and a child bends his rod on the bend of the Greve.

I am reminded again of the beauty of Florence, supported by the locals, father and sons, small families, couples, a feeling like I belong. We discuss Florence again and what lies beneath the Theme Park charade. Tomas tells me not to give up on Florence, that beneath the simulation are deep values and traditions. A love of the soil and what it produces, an appreciation for the local, a commitment to the unique produce in each small village and town. Menus and the families that make them follow the seasons. I find the materiality of these ideas grounding, sparking a different kind of appreciation for the city. I recall my work in ecopsychology and can see that beyond a Freudian interior integration we can look for one with nature, which we are a part of. Is the uncanny just a feeling? Aren't their deeper, or more significant ontological structures or connections beyond affect? It reminds me that while EBB was a Romantic this too was a charade hiding something more substantial.

Well, then the food arrives. Chicken liver crostini. Frittura di verdure miste followed by a very rare bistecca alla fiorentina. A two-litre bottle of chianti (a Fiasco) and then cantucci with almonds dipped in vin santo. There is a lot of laughter and joy and I think about my art and my tendency to go dark. One of the functions of art is to bring joy in dark times, perhaps I need to be less suspicious of the Theme Park and the beauty of Florence. I'm reminded that two days ago I was walking past an apartment near Porta Romana and I saw a plaque dedicated to Dorothy Neville Lees, a British writer who lived here in the early 20th century, a generation after EBB's death. I've been reading excerpts from her *Book Tuscan Friends, Tuscan Feasts* (1907) which is appropriate.



Fig. 8 Laughter at Bebe

Berlin and the Cabinet of Dr Caligari: 16 December, 8.00am

I just returned to Florence from a weekend in Berlin. I've been watching the *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, the ultimate manifestation of the uncanny, set inside the mind of a madman symbolic of the dream of a sleepwalking German people heading from one war to another.

German Expressionism aims to depict subjective responses to objects and places, a form of Psychometry. Denton's famous book on the practice was called *The Soul of Things* (1886) and I can see that this dark expressionism has its place when I read the news. Terrible discoveries in Syrian prisons and the rise of fascism around the world seem to have parallels with Berlin between the wars. I decided not to include a pretty painting in this vignette.



Fig. 9 Rhodes, Paul. Anger is an Acid

The highlight was visiting Berlin Die Brücke art museum, home of a large collection of German expressionism. The artists of the Die Brücke (The Bridge) movement, precursors to the Weimar artists like Grosz and Otto Dix, used strong colours to explore the alienation of the city and to provoke an emotional response, exactly the kind of affect that I have been discussing. I find this very affirming when I get advice to pull away from difficult themes. They are a bridge to me saying “keep going”. Paradoxically the tour guide, also an artist told me she doesn't paint dark themes, but thinks people need escape. I'll try and find some balance although not thematically, stick to expressing difficult themes using vibrant colours

and to perturb the system. I'm very aware my Florence paintings, including those presented here do not fit that mould but I only seem to paint these types of works here. I also must take a break occasionally and paint just the beautiful things.

As we are leaving our host, an Australian Italian, expresses her ambivalence towards Italy in ways that shock me out of some of my naïveté. She has grown uncomfortable visiting because of the hard right politics and links to fascism. These links of course are not hidden, given PM Meloni's history as leader of the student movement of the post-fascist National Alliance. This so-called feminationalist is the antithesis of EBB who I have felt guiding me through this paper. Ghandeesha (2020) describes these international political shifts as spectres of fascism, with direct references to the uncanny. In this sense he describes the uncanny in politics. Contemporary fascists are unhomely but strangely familiar, reminding us of Europe in the 1920s and 30s. He points out, however, that the likes of Meloni are not taking advantage of unemployment and social unrest, but rather they defend the edifice of capitalism against the forces of the climate crisis. It is critical to recognise, however, the strong history of resistance in Italy, including in Florence. On September 1, 1944, 300 m from where I am now writing, the Martinella bell in the Arnolfo Tower in Palazzo Vecchio rang out, signalling the Battle of Florence where partisans supported the liberation of the city from the Nazis. You can hear EBB's voice ringing out from Casa Guidi.

Coda

The aim of this paper was to explore the concept of The Uncanny through a travelogue and art-making process in the city of Florence. This is an unlikely confluence but writing as '*creative-relationally more-than (simply) human practice*' (Gale, 2020, p1.) allows for concepts to be explored in place. I confess to being surprised by the emerging confluence of connections across time, an unexpected assemblage of characters, places, images and ideas that took on their own set of relations. Dialogue between myself and my two Italian friends proved the catalyst for many of the unexpected connections that were made, allowing for automatic thoughts to turn into thickened text.

Robotocist, Masahiro Mori (2012) coined the term uncanny valley to describe the eeriness one feels as a robot gets too close to the human form. My aim was to explore Florence as this kind of valley, as a simulation that causes one to wonder about what is real. I believe I was successful in avoiding the stereotypical hagiography of Tuscany, praising it endlessly for its obvious beauty. But I also believe very gratefully that I failed at my attempted critique. Florence revealed itself to me, not as a Theme Park City, as I had feared, but as something with far deeper roots. Today, now that the paper is finished, I will visit the British Institute of Florence to see if they will have me back in June to present it. Hope to see you there.



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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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