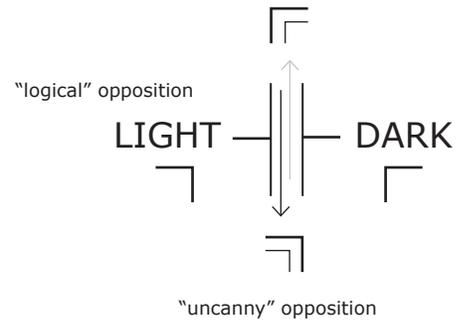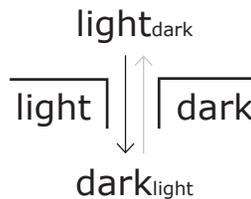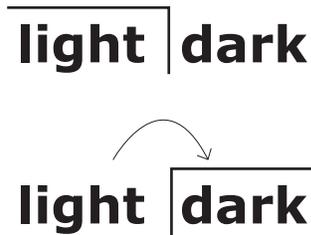# two kinds of negation, two kinds of space-time

Human mental and cultural life begin, Ernst Cassirer writes in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, with the temporal and spatial binary of light and dark. As day and night, this binary gives the "natural event" of diurnal change a "spiritual" basis, so that existence becomes an "emergence" from the darkness of night; and night, equated with death, is conflated with a broad range of actions and conditions that, through hiding, concealment, absence, failure, etc. becomes the hallmark of negation itself. The positive and the negative become the left and right of the human body, a "chirality" that is extended to objects in the world, who by virtue of this handedness are attributed a face and back.

Knowing the world in terms of the spatiality of the human body is called "stereognosis," the idea that as we face the world the world simultaneously faces us. "Propriocept," the complementary idea, is the local-inward organization of the body as microcosm, an "out to in" reversal of stereognosis's "in to out" projection. Whether we see external reality organized in terms of subjective structure or the subject as a microcosm of external qualities, the result is the same. Propriocept internalizes what is "external," stereognosis exteriorizes what is "internal" — but with the qualification that "internal" and "external" themselves do not exist prior to this exchange. The cross-over carries the binary back and forth across a division that is itself a binary, subjective and objective.

The binary of light and dark, conflated through chirality to the cosmic opposition of good and evil, life and death, etc., organizes time not just on the scale of days but also of weeks, months, years, and longer periods. Even in tropical locales where seasonal difference is minimal, there are differences between seasons that, like night and day, establish a binary rhythm. The differences may be based on rainfall, animal or plant behavior, or whatever else has some clear annual pattern. Thanks to the moon's own demonstrated binary, the line separating its light from dark side, the monthly pattern establishes a loose correlation with the solar year, and the looseness requires adjustments in the form of holidays to fill in the gaps with "times outside of time." This is not the only reason for holidays. However; festivals and fasts mark points in the agricultural cycle for agrarian societies. Solar events (solstices, equinoxes) create occasions for other observances. As these times are assimilated into social relations, the original cosmic reason may be almost forgotten, but the relation to light and dark remains in the background as a theme.

This strict binary form of negation requires that one force dominate while the other is banished entirely. Yet, human experience teaches that there are many exceptions to this strict rule. There are conditions where we might say there is "light shining in the darkness" or, more complexly, "darkness shining in the light" (the English poet William Blake used this image). Here we have the co-presence of opposed values, but one is dominant while the other "haunts" from an occulted or distant position. The occulted term does not act directly. Rather, it "resonates from a distance." Its influence is potential, cast in the future … a kind of omen or portent. Or, it is a memory that continues to return. While we would think that most holidays would be grounded in the binary opposition form of negation, some reveal this second form of negation, such as the "Day of the Dead," where ancestral spirits collectively return to visit the living. During these times the ambiguous relation of the living to the dead can be summarized by the culinary practice of feeding what is feared so that it will not stay but return to its place of occultation.

This second form of negation has two primary states, based on binary opposition. Instead of simple positive-negative, we could write this as a primary positive, P, with a secondary negative, N, or vice versa: Pn or Np. In contrast with the strict binary P/N ("positive or negative") we have "positive haunted by a negative," Pn, or "negative haunted by a positive," Np. Ernst Jentsch anticipated Freud's discovery of the uncanny (Unheimlich) as a primary psychic force by identifying two paradigmatic states, "the living person haunted by the spectre of a death awaiting him/her" (an "alive" that contains a "dead" — A_D); complemented by the idea that one first dies a literal death but must go past this event to reach a symbolic death: D_A. Every culture in fact uses this interval between a literal and symbolic death as a period of mourning, to help the soul find permanent rest. In these two hybrid states, we have a different relation of opposition. Negation occurs "internally," and is carried along with the dominent state. The living person continues to live, but with the omen of death or fate invisibly structuring events. Discovery of the relation of the dominant term to the occulted term becomes an important theme in myth, folklore, art, literature, etc. Thus, we may see this hybrid form of negation as something that must be "settled" by cultural practices which "carry along" the binary tension. Unable to resolve this form of chirality, the ethnographic practices continually revisit its logic, evolving new forms and "solutions." Similarly, the first form of binary opposition is the basis of the idea of *agon*, or struggle — opposition that requires one force to banish its opponents … until the moment when the exile returns to pay off old debts and settle grudges "for once and for all." But, each form of negation presumes and requires the other, so no state is permanent; only change itself does not change.

light | dark

light | dark

light$_{dark}$

light | dark

dark$_{light}$

"logical" opposition

LIGHT — DARK

"uncanny" opposition

1 / The relation between the two forms of negation can be shown using a notation system of an "angle" that is itself a picture of the "orthogonal" relationship between the two forms of negation, showing that in each form there is the presence of and dependence on the other form. The vertical bar of the angle is a strict division of left and right sides or spaces. The horizontal bar, in covering or negating one term ("predication") can be flipped to cover the opposite term ("reversed predication").

Predication and predication reversal, the first form of negation, do not exhaust the possibilities of negation, however, and the "hybrid" form of negation occupies, literally and logically, the "gap" between the first type of predication's two possible positions. Between the first negation's horizontal alternation between light and dark (in the example above), the single line logically distinguishing the two states is doubled into a passage-space defined by the two main positions of the secondary type of negation, the "hybrid" A_D and D_A forms (using Jentsch's example of alive-in-dead and dead-in-alive).

This passage-space, thanks to its permanently ambiguous status, is the one we find most in the "ethnographic" evidence of cultures who, using uncertainty as a correlative space-time of personal and collective *anxiety*, attempt various "fixes" through narratives in folklore, myth, and more modern forms of literature and art, where the symptoms of anxiety are translated into motifs and structural elements. Hybrid negation becomes the model and basis for metonymy, where the left-right logic of reversed predication is complemented by effects that operate indirectly and at a distance that is "virtual" in relation to the Euclidean space-time of primary negation. The passage-space of hybrid negation is identified with this virtuality and its detachment from primary space-time; not surprisingly, it is also identified with the ways by which hybrid negation uses disappearance and sudden re-appearance to create suspense and surprise. By emphasizing appearance/disappearance, the "phallic function," Φ, can be more broadly defined: not simply a binary condition but a binary complemented by a hybrid condition. Presence/absence is then understood through a presence that is lacking, requiring some supplement; and absence of something that has not disappeared completely but continues to "resonate at a distance."

The architecture of the theater — common to all cultures even in "theaters in the round" where the geometry of western theaters is not used — demonstrates both the "reversed predication" style of binary negation and the "hybrid" form where opposites are "cross-inscribed" into each other inside a space "between two frames." The primary binary of theater requires the audience to be silent when the action begins on stage. This silence is a "death in life," akin to the medical condition of "catalepsis," feigned death.

stage whisper

flip

AUDITORIUM (catalepsis)

STAGE (binary)

audience "non-noises"
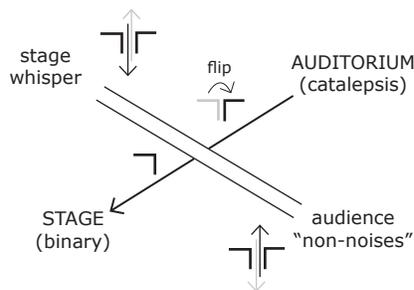
The stage whisper allows an actor to speak directly to the audience without having what is said considered to be a part of the "diegetic" action involving other actors. It is outside the fiction of the play, but not fully outside. It is a "defect" from the point of view of the diegetic action. At the same time, another "partial zone" is created by the opposite polarity of the gap: the case of the audience member defined not as a collective but a singularity, the idealized recipient of this whisper, who "hears/sees what he/she should not have heard."
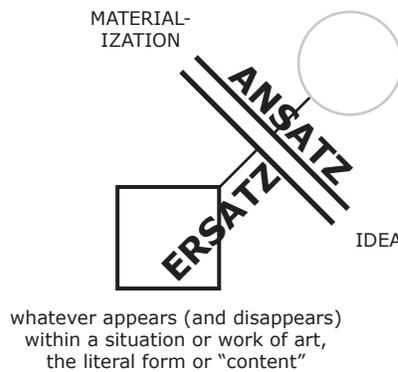
2 / The architectural example of the theater shows how the abstract conditions of the diagram of the two kinds of negation can be carried into literal forms (Vitruvius's *firmitas*) and formal relationships (Vitruvius's *utilitas*). The diagram, a kind of section drawing, demonstrates the correspondence of the middle double-passageway to Vitruvius's *venustas* — a space of ambiguous exceptions and liminal transaction, appropriate to Venus's relation to Eros, the mythic personification of the phallic function, Φ. The Greek letter itself defines — "literalizes" — this diagrammatic space, except that the vertical bar will always be a double line, a corridor or passageway. The O of the phi is both a single round space divided by a bar and also a circuit (cf. the binary of the annual transition between summer and winter is conceptualized as a cycle).

3 / "Reversed predication of the process of reversed predication": is it possible to look at other kinds of quadrations (systems with four elements) to see if the "logic of the two negations" applies? That is, can we "reverse engineer" situations in popular culture, ethnography, the arts, architecture, etc. to see how negation works in these "casual materializations" — i.e. where there is no motive to employ negation in any conscious way, but only a general "condition of anxiety" that energizes the example to be something interesting, exciting, or surprising? The question is not about projecting a template on to living examples in order to justify the theory. Rather it is a means of testing and adjusting the "model," finding names for its bare lines and ambiguous labels.

Negation, and negation of negation, has many forms. Negation can be thought temporally or spatially; it can be put in visual or narrative terms. Even in logic where it has its origins, negation is not a simple matter of cancelling. Using Hegel's term, *Aufheben*, each negation is a cancellation that also preserves some element. Negation creates a *cache*-function, a means of keeping what has to be, for the moment, destroyed. This suggests that the universe is a place where nothing ever really dies. Being, in a magical sense, is possible because it is continually extinguished into non-Being — a "castrophe scenario" if there ever was one!

But, residing in examples alone cannot resolve any issue or refine any idea. The diagrammatic logic of double negation, combining reversed predication with hybrid cross-inscription, maintains a balance sheet, without which there can be no possibility of comparing and contrasting examples from the wide range of media where examples are to be found. The aim is to develop a "critical vocabulary," a set of more-or-less stable terms and definitions, that allows one example to be seen in terms of and relations with others.

"Ersatz" works in a binary, reversed predicate direction, by posing, as against "standard" expectations," something that is initially useless, neutral, of value only as an "entertainment." Theory can both (1) study cultural products that are "gratuitous" (i.e. fictional) in relation to prevailing ideology and (2) itself claim neutral status by beginning as nothing more than a conjecture, a speculative gesture with no interest in outcome. The random/idiot quality of ersatz, to be at all interesting, must check its results, to see if it has been "lucky" at uncovering something interesting, something of value. This luck, if it happens, becomes the basis of an adjustment to the initial model, either in form or (more likely) the labels that translate the form into diagrammatic propostions that pose new questions and situations.

MATERIAL-IZATION

ANSATZ

ERSATZ

IDEA

whatever appears (and disappears) within a situation or work of art, the literal form or "content"

the conventions of response in relation to the presentation/packaging of situations or works of art; the "intended audience"

theory develops, out of the "ersatz" conditions of culture/ethnography, the "lucky guesses" ("ansatz") that, like the double-loaded corridors that construct gaps between conditions of reversed predication, hybrids (= theoretical conjectures) where the main opposed terms are *idea* and *materialization*.

4 / "Ersatz" is an English word derived from the German, meaning a "bogus representation." But, in German, the idea of falsity is not present. The representation may be made to make a point or create a speculative possibility. A related word that did not get adopted into English is *Ansatz*, a representation made that turns out to be a "lucky guess." In mathematics, where unknown conditions are encountered, a theorem or formula is rigged up, knowing in advance that it is an *ad hoc* construction — something "out of the blue." However, the introduction of this "ersatz" attempt creates a reaction. The result is, if the construction has some potential relationship to the real situation, a significant response that can be used to create a second, luckier guess, an *Ansatz*. This justifies the original "bogus" attempt, suggesting that further corrections can be made to turn the lucky guess into a systematic investigation.

The ersatz-ansatz procedure emphasizes the need for speculation, but it also retroactively demonstrates that any theory has, and should have, an initial "worthlessness." That is, theory should not be "invested" in any particular outcome. Otherwise, theory would be an extension of an ideological position that "hopes for," even if secretly, a place in a utopian design that has been already established and is in need of political enforcement. Theory in service of ideology is no more than a "disciplinary procedure" to achieve the hoped-for outcome, the political ideal. Ersatz-ansatz uses the idea of the bogus to disconnect theory from ideology. Theory "pretends to be an idiot" without any particular interest in outcome. This is theory's only possible claim to objectivity and/or validity.