The Möbius strip

The familiar twisted strip of paper that produces a single surfaced and single edged topology serves to illustrate the central phenomena of boundary language topology: recursion and self-reference are FUNDAMENTALLY a matter of the uncanny erasure of the distinction between inside and outside and, hence, of primary architectural interest.

1. precursors: the gapped loop

The Möbius band is the central reference topology to issues of self-reference. But, it also illustrates the logic of the uncanny as a violation of the separation of inside and outside. Western philosophy’s classic oppositions — mind/body, essence/appearance, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc. — are all restatements in some form or other of the inside-outside relationship. The uncanny did not emerge from this metaphysics; rather, it was rationalism that ‘let the uncanny out of its cages’ of tradition, ritual, and religion. Lacan held that the blurring of inside-outside was fundamental to the psyche, and labeled the term ‘extimité’ (the word for uncanny being difficult or impossible in French). It is useful to note that extimité is close to Lacan’s more famous contribution, the ‘mirror stage’, where the subject begins to gain control over his/her body through realization of the gaze of the Other. Self-reference issues abound in extimité, and it’s important to include such classic forms of this problem as the (mathematical) issue of recursion and feedback as well as the philosophical issue of self-reference (the Liar’s Paradox, etc.).

One precursor to the Möbius band is the gapped loop, where feedback has ‘removed’ one component of an inverter switch (above left), which creates a condition analogous to the Lacanian ‘return of the Real’, a condition that is both temporal and spatial in its theme of return and location of origin, identified with an a-symbolic object or event. The short-circuit and return of desire to the gap of the impasse/gap become, in the Möbius band, the twist that confounds logic and introduces an ‘intransitive’ element. The twist cannot be located. It is a property of the WHOLE band, not just the point where, in fabrication, the two ends of a strip are joined together.

2. impossible space

Diagrams typically work by establishing locations on a page and specifying, with arrows and such, connections or distinctions between them. The page is a simple surface without ‘recursive’ properties, it appears. The Möbius band undermines all that, dislocating the act of the flip, distributing it along its length or condensing it into something that belies its actual effect. It is true to say both that there is and isn’t a flip. Draw a pencil across the surface without lifting it and you won’t find a flip. Mark the edge and you’ll find only one! Nonetheless, we ‘know’ somehow that something is wrong with this surface.

The Möbius band is ‘uncanny’ because it removes the boundary between inside and outside, but can it be called a diagram? Technically, the band can’t be drawn or even photographed. With access to a dimension outside of the band’s surface, we can ‘see’ a twist but in reality there is no twist. This is a case where what is revealed is false, and that truth is not a matter of concealment but the disadvantage of a dimension of perceptual freedom! The blind person’s tactile perception of the Möbius band is superior to the sighted person’s perception of a twist and two edges. Topology trumps projection. The lesson Lacan employs is to show how the unconscious has its own logic that consciousness cannot comprehend without some considerable difficulty. The unconscious ‘does not lie within the space of the conscious’, just as the dream does not lie within the space of waking. Recovery of the ‘contents’ of the dream or unconscious requires a procedure that, like psychoanalysis, uses the uncanny as a portal and model. As soon as we use a method or procedure that is analogous to projection, we have lost the unconscious just as Orpheus lost Eurydice by turning around to see her on the way out of Hades.

3. other images of the Möbius relation

Lacan used a variety of linked images to show how components of the psyche were inseparable from each other. The most popular was the historical ‘Borromeo knot’, three rings, each of which lies on top of the other, held together by the final ring’s ‘over-under’ lock. Cut or remove any ONE ring and the others separate. This means that the subject is ‘simultaneously’ the object, or Big Other, as well as the object-cause of the desire. No point in the BoLaGram can be formalized beyond its relationships with other elements in the Lacanian L-scheme, or the anamorphic process in general.