The arbitrary name of ‘operator’ is given to the relationship of two vectors present in every representation, roughly corresponding to the signifier and signified — the representation (signified) and artifact (signifier). Saussure’s point, that the signifier must be arbitrarily chosen is shown by the initial ‘orthogonal’ relationship between the vectors. What happens in art and literature, of course, is that the role of the signifier becomes a repository for concealed meanings that may later come to light; hence, the S/s formula for the sign becomes intrinsically an occasion for the ‘uncanny’ collapse of the signifier’s vector on to the ‘plane’ of representation.

1. the L-scheme and the origin of the uncanny

Lacan’s rectangular L-scheme for relating the subject, ego projection, Other, and object-cause of desire implicitly contain dynamics of appearance-anamorphosis and symbolic relationships. These force a criss-cross as the unconscious (primarily symbolic) relation between the subject and Other and the connection between the subject’s fantasy projections and ‘objective’ but unsymbolizable causes of desire. This dynamic, it could be argued, gave rise to Lacan’s subsequent interest in the ‘unrepresentable’ topological media of the Möbius strip, knots, and other formulations.

For boundary language purposes, the L-scheme contains two ‘operators’, or vectorial structures combining representation and artifact. The artifact is, like the signifiers of language, the material component that has ‘no meaning in itself’ and is subservient to the representation it conventionally embodies, just as the word ‘tree’ is itself insignificant outside of poetry (which might make use of its sound). However, boundary language shows how poetry and other kinds of art use the artifact’s presumed innocence to store elements that, lying initially outside of the symbolic network, may suddenly be ‘collapsed’ to that level.

2. condensation

The lower-right component of the L-scheme has to do with the subject’s ‘inner world’, while the upper-left component involves objectification. This is not a strict categorization, since the ego is ‘made for show’ and the object-cause of desire is implicitly related to the subject’s essential subjectivity. But, as a fundamental diagram of subject v. Other, the L-scheme’s two ‘Ls’ are the uncanny’s raw material of inside and outside, and we expect to see that boundary blurred, compromised, or even erased.

What we wish to keep track of is the way in which the uncanny’s ‘classic’ components (cited by Freud), optics and identity, are given a central role when the two operators are collapsed and combined into a more ‘topological’ relationship. In collapsed form, the representational vectors are shown parallel (‘contracts’) and the artifact vectors extend to construct an ‘anamorphosis’ diagonal. The left part of this identifies the ‘objective’ territory of the object-cause of desire. The right zone is the subject’s place of fantasy projection, which can construct ideal points of view including the ego or other (f — ‘victim’ is the boundary language designation).

The example of Vertigo shows how the contract and optical anamorphs can work in a film: Scotty’s ‘deal’ with Elster is the catalyst for the murder of a wife we never see, through the substitution of a fake who is ‘Real’ because her identity and mask reveal the truth of the plot.

3. free radicals

Operators can be found in works of art wherever the relation of the viewer to the viewed is undermined or complexly defined. As with Dürer’s illustration of the ‘Artist and Model in the Studio’, operators divide the scene into zones with distinctively different visual status, where we see, we ‘see seeing’, and we re-imagine our own spectator space. Each angle orthogonally joins a (sagittal) line of sight with a process of interpolation and re-assembly. The spiral indicator on the right window-sill flags the self-referential role of the iconic objects, the vase and topiary plant. Interpolation (the sequential assembly of the visual scene following some protocol of representation) is tied to interpellation (the necessity to fix a point of view).