method of ‘uncanny retracing’

As Mladen Dolar demonstrates, the Enlightenment converts pre-Enlightenment ‘uncanny’ traditions (the evil eye, magic boundaries, alchemical transformations, etc.) into stable relationships typically defined through a dichotomy of ‘figure-ground, inside-outside, subject-object. Behind nearly every classic rationalist dyad lies an ‘uncanny’ tradition that, when excavated from its folkloric, mythic, or religious-ritualistic context, reveals a structure akin to the ‘suture’ of the anamorphic operator, whose Möbius-band like pathway involves dislocation of the stable categories and positions imposed by the Enlightenment.

1. Enlightenment oppositions

Whether subject-object, inside-outside, figure-ground, sacred-profane, etc., the Enlightenment practice of contrasting two ‘zones’ of clear opposition is attempt to (1) spatialize and then (2) regionalize what are essentially experiential-temporal phenomena. Once spatialized, relationships can be treated like territories with margins, boundaries, centers, and peripheries. ‘Core’ regions can serve as places where concepts are defined and exemplified with minimum confusion. Margins can be ‘blurred’ or ‘indefinite’ and thus call for attention. This spatial method resembles the expedition of the civilized explorer team into the wilderness, where cannibals and other exotic beings can be described or, if problematic, destroyed. The core-and-periphery model that dominates spatialization strategies typically associates wildness with motive (the word ‘wild’ is itself related to ‘willed’). In the settlement of the American West, for example, ‘savages’ were uncivilized through their own moral resistance to the values of European society, so violence against them ‘for their own good’ was justified.

It could be possible that Enlightenment dyads, as spatializations and territorializations, are essentially the same, or share the same ‘spatial logic’ that converts time into region.

2. undoing the dyad

It may be possible to de-spatialize the dyad by recovering the narrative that was suppressed, converted, appropriated, or sanitized through the ideological operation of territorialization. In Lacanian terms, ideology works through the device of the ‘master signifier’, a conversion of effect into cause through a syllogistic manipulation that silences the ‘middle term’ that, in the first instance, collates effects together and, in a second instance, assigned the role of cause to the that which must be destroyed to restore the ‘transitive order’ disrupted by the ‘master signifier’. The middle term has the mathematical form of the ‘square wave’. It is t/f/t/f (true/false...) in a way that suspends any stable assignment of value. Like an imaginary number, it is ± rather than + or -. More accurately, it is +/-/+/- ... in the same way that, in the Lacanian model of desire, the polarity of circular motion is made ambiguous by the gap in the motion of return, where instead of terminating motion, motion is made perpetual through the lack of an object.

Anamorphic conditions are clearly a species of this process of master signification, and it is necessary to note that the ‘monstrosity’ of the t/f/t/f... square wave (composite form) is frequently materialized in the form of monsters, even in their popular culture costumes. Like Lacan’s L-scheme, the square wave is also a crossing of the unconscious with the imaginary relation between the ego and the object-cause of desire, creating in the subject’s relation to the other through networks of symbolic relationships, narratives that somehow characterize and ‘qualify’ this gap and its anamorphic crossing.

3. expanding the ‘paradox’

Where the Enlightenment dyad (think of ‘theory/practice’) was posed always to present the appearance of an unsolvable paradox requiring compromise or a ‘forced choice’ (typically involving a chiastic formation such as ‘thoughtful practice’ and ‘applied theory’), the dyad expanded after finding the ‘uncanny’ correlate is more effective, in that it simultaneously identifies the master signifier structure that underlies the Enlightenment formation and shows how popular culture and narrative versions have managed to ‘short circuit’ the paradox.

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First, the ‘L-square’ of oppositions is divided into its ‘contractual’ ($) and ‘subjective’ (-A) components. Locate, in popular culture or cultural tradition, an event or practice that best reflects the ‘collapse’ of the concealed element on to the field of representation. These ‘operators’ can be found within the visual field, but they typically refer to a narrative component that informs the twist or flip that occurs with each.