

the root of distinction

The modern uncanny, based on the blurring of distinctions that maintain distance between polar terms, can be 're-traced' to discover how the distance collapsed by the uncanny was a matter of, simultaneously, 'near and far'. This raises the issue of the distinction itself. As such, the distinction is usually given value by what it divides: ideas, territory, periods of time, logical status. Finding any 'essence' would seem counterproductive. But, in the case of the uncanny, it is the blurring, and the effect of the uncanny itself, with the attendant collapse of distance, that points directly to just such an essence. The case of the Möbius band throws light on the 'distinctionless distinction' where continuity and discontinuity are combined to produce the uncanny effect that creates the effect of two sides and two edges when really there are only one edge and one side. By refining this effect and its component parts, the uncanny's spatial and temporal 'credentials' can be made clear.

1. the planet of the idiots

In a short fable about a small planet, with a uniform surface and one territory-craving monarch, a kingdom expands over the surface, building a circular wall around its territory with each new phase of expansion. At two points, however, the rational-minded wall-builders are confronted with a seeming paradox. After the wall passes the equatorial middle, the builders need fewer, not more stones to complete their job. The wall protecting their larger kingdom becomes now smaller and smaller! At the point where the kingdom occupies nearly the whole planet, the wall frames the kingdom by surrounding an 'outside' that is increasingly small. Before the wall disappears entirely, it more clearly defines the negative 'elsewhere' rather than the positive kingdom.

This situation can be described in terms of a 'square wave', 'IJ', oscillating between the 'transitive' situation defining the more credible relationship between territorial expansion and border protection and the 'intransitive' condition of surrounding a larger kingdom by a smaller and smaller wall. There is no middle ground, because the equatorial line, once crossed, reverses the relationship between territory and border.

Where 'I' stands for the commonsensical space of transitive relationships (near is near, far is far), 'J' stands not so much for the reverse case as *the case of reversal*. The square wave indicates that the switch between the transitive and intransitive is sudden — immediate, in fact. What supports such a sudden shift in actual experience? In the case of the planet of the idiots, the sudden shift is the reversed direction of building materials (stones go back to the quarry). In art situations, it is the audience that does the reversing, and some preparation is required.

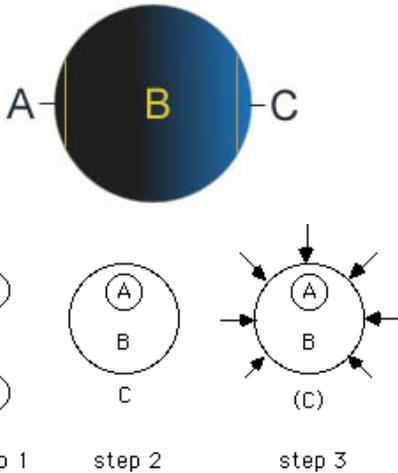
For example, in Hitchcock's film *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), the young girl Charlie suddenly realizes that her uncle is a murderer and her 'boyfriend' is not a sociologist researching American family life but an FBI agent. This quick shift in her point of view comes about thanks to the audience's gradual preparations. By suppressing the growing evidence of her visiting Uncle Charlie's culpability in murders back east, the audience has used an 'It couldn't be!' denial to stage a mock hope for the best, even though they know quite well that any Hitchcock movie is not about avoiding the worst. The double negative strategy of all art ('Willing suspension of disbelief') is played out here as a denial of the negative image of Uncle Charlie, which is equivalent to cultivating the 'impossibility' of his evil nature

to the point where it acquires shock value. We get little artistic pleasure from finding out that a mentally deranged degenerate plans a brutal kidnapping or murder; rather we 'enjoy' seeing how a successful businessman at the height of his career is nonetheless a terrorist or child molester. The double negative (doubting criminality rather than expecting it) brings about the quick shift capability of the 'IJ' square wave.

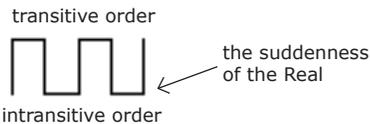
Generalizing, it's possible to say that all art, to the extent that it involves the double negative at, at least, one level (willing suspension of disbelief), is based on the uncanny, propelled by the 'quick' effect of the square wave — the idea of difference expressed as a minimum, a thin space where the distance insulating the good from the bad, the rich from the poor, the past from the present, etc. has *collapsed*. What's more, the collapse is only a matter of our recognition that the collapse has 'already and always' taken place, that it was somehow permanently built in from the start.

2. sequences

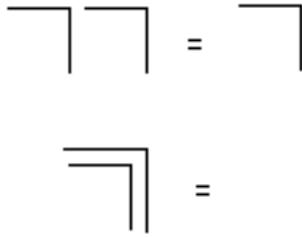
Transitivity requires divisions that are logically established and consistent. Systems, such as Aristotle's system of causes, begin with some logically original position ('material') and progress according to some factor that changes predictably. In Aristotelian causality, the role played by 'mind' is gradually increased (material > efficient > formal > final; motive is gradually added to 'motive-less' material). In the



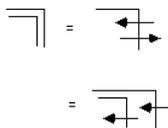
On the idiotic planet, the expanding kingdom requires a wall that, until it reaches the equator, will require more stones each time the territory is enlarged. After passing the equatorial point, however, the required wall will be smaller, and stones will have to be taken back. The condition is defined by one full phase of a 'square wave' (IJ).



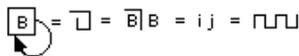
In *Shadow of a Doubt*, it is Uncle Charlie's normalcy that causes the audience to extend its every hope that he is not really a serial killer. When realization finally comes it is a sudden 'return of the Real' (*tuché*) that brings along with it an entire 'world' of evil.



The only two axioms of Spencer-Brown's calculus ('a call and a call again is equivalent to one call'; and 'a cross and a cross again is equivalent to no cross') are reversed by the condition of the closed curved surface, where the 'intransitive order' makes a cross equivalent to no cross, and where two calls cancel each other out.



Ambiguity is built into the symbolic notation of the calculus, which can be read temporally (above) or spatially (below).



analogous ways of expressing the idea of the self-referring boundary



Alfred Jarry, 'pataphysician' and author of *Ubu Roi*.

uncanny reversal of sequence, the origin reappears at the end, as the 'master trope' governing all others, playing a secret role 'all along'. Just as the test of the Möbius band's weird form involves drawing a line that meets itself although it has covered both 'sides' of the paper strip, the encounter is an encounter with the Real (*tuché*) that, like the theatrical presentations of this event, must occur in the atmosphere of immediacy and surprise, if not horror. In George Spencer-Brown's calculus, this condition is the one of 'recursion', where an element slips out of place and introduces itself into an earlier part of some linear sequence. Spencer-Brown notes that this slippage of linear order gives rise to a condition where it is (materially) impossible to judge whether a boundary exists or not, or (alternatively) if a boundary is single or double. This is not a complicated mathematical issue but one that is as simple as whether or not one considers the sides of a painting as a part of painting, a point more clearly made in languages where four-sidedness is already included (It. *il quadro*, 'painting'). Magicians make extensive use of the times and spaces that the audience has passed through but not noticed, as do film-makers and story-tellers in all cultures. The single boundary becomes double when a traveller suffers a breakdown or when the object of the journey was encountered on the way but not noticed.

In other words, the recursive condition of topology is the stuff of culture, a quick and easy means of introducing the theme of self-reference. In psychology it is the difference between unconsciousness as *distinguished from* consciousness and the condition of blurring that comes about when the unconscious becomes conscious, as in the memory of a dream. In the Richard Linklater film *Waking Life* (2001) the margin between waking and dreaming has been removed. We can't experience dreaming as dreaming, we experience it as waking. In a comparative political election primary situation, one hopes that the opponents will field a weak candidate, presuming that the candidate will lose. But, if the candidate wins, the losers experience the 'nightmare come true' that they themselves constructed and perhaps originally supported.

3. antipodes

As in the example of the 'planet of the idiots', the closest relationship is the one that exists between the points that are topologically opposite. It is there that the uncanny appears, or rather that the issue of identity appears in the form of the uncanny, as an encounter with the Real. The issue of identity becomes a theme within the repertoire of the uncanny, and these are known widely because of the relative simplicity and economy of the 'themes of the fantastic': the double, travel through time, contamination of reality by the dream, and the story within the story (*mise-en-abîme*).

The figure of antipode is directly related to another, unexpected project: that of knowledge itself. As Donald Rumsfeld aptly put it, there are things we know, things we don't know, things we know we don't know, and things we don't know that we don't know. Rumsfeld's system does not fully fill out the field, since it leaves out the important category of 'things that we don't know that we know'. This is the important basis of what the Surrealists such as Jarry called 'pataphysics'. In contrast to Positivism (knowing only as knowing what you know), philosophy (knowing for sure only what you don't/can't know), Pataphysics is a form of knowing something without being aware of knowing it. (The remaining Rumsfeldian category, not knowing that one doesn't know, is Positivism's Achilles' heel.)

Pataphysical knowledge can be summed up in terms of a single rhetorical figure, chiasmus. Chiasmus is the staged interaction of two 'lines' of thought, action, or being where the Real is suppressed and, at the same time, 'scheduled to re-appear' at precisely the moment where its appearance (*tuché*) will bring about a 'super-consciousness' (awareness plus awareness of the *particular nature* of that awareness).

The antipodal points of pataphysical discovery have to do with minimum variation, following Roussel's formula of the *procédé*. In the phrase, *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard* (The white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table) must somehow reach the phrase, *Les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard* (letters [written by] a white man about the hordes of the old plunderer). The minimal difference between 'billard' and 'pillard' generates two completely different sentences, and between these sentences, the 'thin space' of difference in the signifier becomes a nearly infinite distance to be traversed by the signified. The two sentences serve as antipodes, but it is also important to look at the issue of minimum/infinite as a distance to be traversed — i. e. in terms of the 'problematic' of the journey. Following Henry Johnstone's *Categories of Travel*, the difference between authentic and inauthentic travel is minimal, but it generates the distance that, in terms of the trip, establishes a quest value, and that quest becomes the 'work' of art, conceived either as a labor of the artist, a problem for the physical work of art, or the generic involvement of the audience taken literally or metaphorically.