why study boundary language?

Marcel Duchamp stated it simply: our culture is built around the production and consumption of objects whose utility falls outside the domain of needs for shelter, food, and security. This surplus is sustained by desire, but even more important is the structure of desire that, despite failures, gaps, misapplications, and breakdowns creates a zone materialized by the imagination to influence events in every domain of life. There are two directions to follow: (1) the study of specific cases where technology demands our specific response and extends this demand to social structure and thought — interpellation, the technological critique of Jacques Ellul, ‘appliance theory’; and (2) the study of the uncanny, which attempts to isolate terms but then blurs that separation — a practice we learn primarily ‘at the movies’ but neglect in our theories, books, and schools. This neglect is ‘structural’ and based on the nature of the uncanny itself, so the remedy of the neglect must take into account the ‘necessity of neglect’ as well as the strategic centrality of the uncanny at all levels of life — behavior, social life, perception, and thought.

1. When Demand Exceeds Need

The case of demand surpassing need is clear from the story of the Garden of Eden. In the ideal precinct created for the satisfaction of need, there is a surplus element, the Tree of Life, guarded by the serpent who provides the surplus information to Eve that God has left out something in this attempt to supply Adam and Eve with all they need. The materialization of this lack is the fruit, whose very form (the toroid of the apple) some have suggested indicates the secret nature of this lack and its relation to self-reference. The excessive demand of Eden suggests the general structure of excessive demand elsewhere: in language, this excess is the ‘voice’, where phonemic meanings are surpassed by an element that cannot be assimilated. The voice has an uncanny relationship to speech. It is the excess, the unaccountable element of ventriloquism, the part that does not belong in the body. The voice’s uncanniness is not an accident. It is a co-effect and possibly consequence of the topological results of the excess of demand over need, where the primary example of Eden becomes extremely informative. The walled garden surrounded by wilderness is not two separate spaces separated by a wall but one space with an interior split, a permanent internal division that is ‘set against itself’. This structure is made evident by the presence of the Tree of Life and serpent, and additionally by God’s invisibility (that is later in the story exchanged for blindness). The problem is not so much one of interdiction and violation but of the ‘impossible choice’ of the divine command not to taste of the fruit of the Tree of Life in the first place.

Robert Graves’ controversial view, that Genesis was written from Sumerian tablets arranged in a ‘boustrophedon’ (lines are read in a back-and-forth motion), where Hebrew scribes read all lines from right to left, creating backward sequences and gaps with every new line, takes the structure of Eden to the text itself, where the interpellation of holy text as the ‘word of God’ that cannot be altered is not the literal story but, instead, the interpellation required by the practices of misreading the ‘typical’ cosmogonical myth typical of the cultures of the Levant. The Genesis text is, on this account, precisely more sacred because it permanently preserve not just an account of origins but a re-entractment translated in terms of misreading.

2. Apparatus Theory

One direction that this topology of the excess leads is towards the ideas of Althusser, Lacan, Metz, and others that the very ‘apparatus’ of the camera is in itself sufficient to make film an ideological medium. Extending this theory, any apparatus — cars, televisions, household appliances, garden tools, etc. — come with their own implicit instructions that transform not only the user but the culture that produces and uses them. The broader theory can be traced to Jacques Ellul’s The Technological Society, where he makes the point that any technology actively transforms the user and involves unknown interpellation that causes society to adopt to the tool, rather than adopting the tool to society. The saying the summarizes this view is: ‘If the hammer is your only tool, the world quickly becomes made of nails’. The machine/gadget/apparatus interpellates the user, demanding of him/her to a specific place and giving him/her specific duties and mandates. This interpellation is converted to interpolation as the context of the machine/gadget/apparatus is itself transformed according to the ‘problematic’ of technology. Privation (what the tool cannot do) is converted into prohibition (what one should not do with the tool, as a rhetorical position, an ‘ought’ that is extended by language, customs, and legal provisions). Apparatus theory plays out the political aspects of desire without necessarily having to refer to the structure of desire itself, but at any point (cultural theory, ideology analysis, social group theory, etc.) the issue of desire can be re-introduced.

Apparatus theory can by itself lead to a ‘screen theory’ because of the involvement of dimensionality, placement, space-time structures, and other modifications of perception and use of social space created by the structure of desire and the interpellation of the machine/gadget/apparatus. There are many examples where the screen condition of anamorphosis is set up in an almost literal self-evident manner: the interior of an SUV, for example, where between the windshield and driver lie innumerable distractions — cup-holders, GPS devices, CD players, instruments to control children’s DVD enjoyment in the back seats — each with its own ideology of use and ability to transform images.

The other approach to apparatus theory involves film theory, the original ‘home’, to analyze the impact of the ‘inside frame’ on thought and life. Even a purely diagrammatic analysis reveals that the phenomenon of suture corresponds to what in mathematics is treated as the problem of self-reference (recursion, short-circuit, Gödel’s theorem, etc.). The inside-out action of suture requires some version of the Möbius band analogy, since there is no ‘extrinsic dimension’ that can frame the independent effects of the inside frame. Within the calculus of George Spencer-Brown, this is the case of the closed-curved surface, where any division of space can be both enclosed and enclosing, inclusive and exclusive. This eventually returns to Lacan’s idea of the ‘extimate’ (extimité) and, hence, the general themes of the uncanny.

3. The Uncanny

The other direction generated by the topology of excess is the uncanny. This is the topic that has been (1) concealed by Enlightenment-related dichotomies such as subject-object, mind-body, etc.; (2) discovered but then forgotten by Freud; (3) rediscovered but then de-emphasized by Lacan; (4) resurrected numerous times but always re-subsumed within some ‘traditional study’, such as Vidler’s recalibration of the uncanny as a symptom of modernism. In short, with all these discoveries followed by denial or neglect, it is precisely...
the element of self-cancellation that should be the issue! ‘The Uncanny’ is the prize recipient who always refuses the award, the guest who does not show up, the missing ingredient of the intellectual recipe. Why is neglect an denial seemingly built in to the idea of the uncanny?

The answer lies in language, specifically where Freud and (more forcefully) Lacan argue that ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’. This means on one level what the most popular interpretation says it means: that the signifier’s relationship to each other, and to the place of the signified (representation), is the secret structure of the mind, specifically in its need to suppress knowledge through various strategies (ideology, dream, fantasy, de-constructivism, etc.). The other, more obvious interpretation is simple-minded at first glance: the very fact that language involves a speaker and a listener/audience, and that the dialectic implied by the simple existence of any ‘word’ engages an ‘idiotic symmetry’ where the chain of signifiers is also grounded within the networks of symbolic relationships that are, in turn, sustained by the structure of desire, which itself allows for gaps, variations, missing pieces, and breakdowns.

The condition of language is, like the cinema screen, an inside frame. Communication engenders a ‘dimensional’ explanation based on the metaphor of linear flow, temporized by the diachrony of the acts of speech. Whereas meaning is fundamentally ‘syntactical’, speech is unavoidable sequential and diachronic. Meaning of the beginning is unstable until the end, or rather it is the case that the stability created in the beginning is always subject to being destabilized by what comes only at the end. Even the concepts of beginning and end are artifacts of the metaphor of flow and reduce models of communication to lines, chains, channels, etc. Language as exchange is not just dialectical, it involves an ‘idiotic symmetry’ where the fantasy projections of the interlocutors create four ‘persons’ for any two actual interlocutors. In the case of the stage and screen, the listener is the audience, whose silent reception of the ‘speech’ of the actor on stage is framed in the logic of the classical rhetorical syllogism, the ‘enthexeme’. Here, the middle term (the one that facilitates conjunction of the major and minor premise) does not appear in the conclusion and is ‘silent’ both in the literal sense that the audience is required to more or less be quiet during a performance and in the sense that the audience’s presence and reception is the ‘anonymous connector’ that works to hold the causes and effects of the performance together. Any actor who does not recognize the audience’s silent assent cannot sustain a convincing performance, since the audience can easily recognize that they have inadvertently become voyeurs.

Although apparatus theory analyzes the same ‘inside frame’ conditions as the uncanny, the uncanny brings to bear its three traditional themes: anamorphosis (involvement of optics and visuality, the ‘voice’ in its uncanny role in language (as in the audience’s dark ‘silence’), and the creation of ‘partial objects’, another specifically Lacanian thematic that enables us to realize that the inside frame, itself a partial object, is expanded through the logic of its genre to countless other objects and structures that don’t resemble screens or stages at all: the organ that seems to ‘act on its own’, such as the spasmodically saluting arm of the ex-Nazi scientist in Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (1964).

The uncanny reveals its centrality to psychoanalysis (and everything else) by focusing on the place of representation as more significant than the alleged significeds of representation. This place structured by desire, undermined by the anamorphic action of fantasy, and simultaneously structuring and de-constructing the authority of the desire of the Other, is the place of ‘contingency’ where we encounter the Real. Privation (the limits of the senses, of logic, of language, etc.) becomes prohibition. ‘Noise’ (the suppressed artifact created by the production of meaning) becomes ‘voice’, ignorance becomes secret, silence becomes conspiracy, and time folds back on itself to create retroactive meanings. What’s even more important for those who specifically study human spaces and places, this ‘place of the representation’ and all its inside-frame quirks is the actual structure of the real places we encounter in the everyday, whose normacy requires the suppression of these ‘uncanny’ effects. What film enables us to do, and the reason that film study is essential in ANY study of space/place, is to see clearly how the ‘apparatus’ of the camera explicitly states the implicit ideological/concealed nature of the inside frame that, in every spatial condition, makes a view into a theory about views, a thought into a conversation, a field into a domain, and a limit of the senses into a no-trespassing sign.

Peter Sellars as Dr. Strangelove comically demonstrates the operation of the ‘partial object’ — his arm mechanically relives his Nazi past and, hence, the structure of desire that anamorphically deforms his personality and the ‘voice’ of his evil past.