# theory of everything

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Every theory is in reality a 'theory of everything' if it at all pretends to be consistent. You can't turn a theory 'on' just when conditions allow, it has to be applicable 'in theory' wherever it is thrown, and screen theory can claim no exemptions. The momentary focus on the pre-Surrealism of Roussel presses the question of the absurd: in the face of non-meaning or resistance to apparent conventional meaning, what is the status of the audience, the work of art, and the relation between the two? In the case of Roussel's abortive theatrical productions, the audience answered this question by throwing things and walking out. But, some artists rallied to his cause. Why? They perhaps recognized the 'classic' pattern: it is not enough to believe in the work of art (which would make it maudlin), one has to suspend *dis*belief — a double negative (Coleridge's famous formula). The difference between the two is immense. In the first case, the work of art runs the risk of being confused with reality. In the second, the double negative opens the way for the employment of *minimum difference*. This was exemplified by Roussel's *procédé*, the elaboration of narrative between two phrases or sentences that were nearly identical. But, knowing minds knew the larger significance of this. Freud's dream theory, the 'classical' element in architecture and art, the role of anamorphosis and mistaken identity that go back to the origins of culture (and, not surprisingly, are the two key elements of the uncanny).
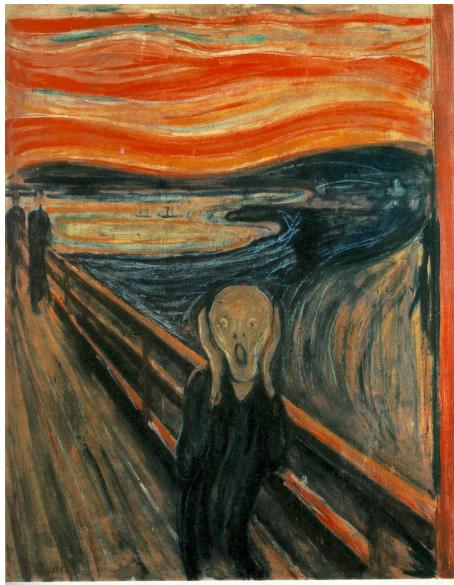
Edvard Munch, 'The Scream' (Skrik), 1893. National Gallery, Oslo. Two distant crossers stand at the margin of the drama where the landscape and sky are absorbed by the 'voiceless' scream of the crosser in the middle. In the radical perspective of the bridge during evening sunset, the password is that of horror.

The construction of multiple stone follies in the 'Giardino dei Mostri', at Bomarzo, near Viterbo, Italy, suggest an early incarnation of Canterel. Reportedly the garden was the setting of night-time revels where torchlight and other thaumaturgic tricks unnerved the guests and amused Count Orsini.

1. between the two deaths

Absurdity is based on a paradoxical condition of expecting the very thing that is not provided: meaning. Where meaning is suspended, the first question has to do with practical matters. Was the suspension due to a technical problem or an intended design? In the case of the latter, missing meaning is connected with an 'ought': meaning 'ought' to be supplied in return for the 'suffering' of not knowing. Absurdity should have its pay-off and not be just a cruel, idiotic trick. This state is common to universal art forms: the joke, the riddle, the mystery. Taken generally, it could be credited as the basis for all narratives where anything at all is learned and where that learning is related to the essence of the work. It was, interestingly, Socrates' method of 'paralyzing' his friends with questions they could not answer. Paralysis, more generally, is the essence of the audience's status as dead or, rather, 'between the two deaths'. Mortuary mythology describes the soul during the interval before final rest as an interpolative motion of the soul while the body is paralyzed. The connection between the here of the living and the there of the dead is maintained through the paradoxes and puzzle-forms given to give this interval the full pedigree of anamorphosis. Richard Bernheimer has written about the strange coincidence in art between the concentric rings of angels and other celestial beings and the rows of seats in an auditorium. This confirms the audience-death relationship but also reminds us of the central role of the voice (*audi*torium) and even the resemblance of the auditorium to sound waves themselves.

Here we have to also connect the auditory with the voice's uncanny ability to reverse the logic of sound travelling out from a source. As Malden Dolar has noted, Edvard Munch's famous painting, 'The Scream', could be depicting a world collapsing through the open mouth of the pedestrian on the bridge. The collapse of space by means of the voice, the voice as a 'password' (meaning without meaning; knowledge without knowledge), makes the Coleridgean formula of suspension of disbelief into a topography where the double negative creates an intermediate space, a gap, which cannot be closed without the proper rituals.

2. the riddle that contains its answer

Roussel's absurd constructions were peculiar: the 'problem' of a void of meaning carried with it the 'solution' of infinite meanings, meanings multiplied and minutely detailed. In *La Vue*, small lens and bottle labels opened on to worlds populated with infinite variation. In *Locus Solus*, the creation of a memory garden where the master mnemonicist Canterel placed exhibits miniaturizing and consolidating famous moments in history, the mind doing the remembering was not the conscious mind with its concrete past but the unconscious mind, with its notorious disrespect for linear temporality. The key to the dreamscape logic is the phrase, 'place of representation'. In the waking world, the place of representation is taken by the signified, the 'intended' conventional meaning. One says what one means to say, and if 'words get in the way', corrections are made. What happens when the place of representation is taken over by the signifier? The signifier may be the figurative expression: 'the edge of night'; 'end of its tether'; 'ghost of a chance'. In the dream, these figurative appropriations come into their own. The night has a real edge, the end becomes a tether, and chance does some real haunting. This is a flip of vectors, where the vector intended to point out and down now comes face to face with others of its kind. The place of representation becomes a *locus solus*, a place where dream fragments mingle and coalesce. But the signifieds … What becomes of them? Either this is a dream or it is art. In the dream, the signifieds now point down and out, 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. But, in art, they become partial objects of two sorts: (1) the object-cause of desire, where signifieds become the unspeakable, unintelligible kernels that generate both desire and repetition; and (2) the fantasy projection of the Other who is 'supposed to know', who occupies the ideal vantage point that will be forever off-screen, out of sight, permanently invisible but also, through the logic of 'pataphysics (always spelled with an " ' " before the word), permanently blind.

3. you call this art?

Architecture has demonstrated that there have been six principal periods when the connection between verbal formula, architecture as an 'anagogic' art practically and predominantly concerned with a 'prisca theologica' transcending and preceding cultural forms of religion, and the parallel operations in other art forms, most principally music, has dominated. In the original period, identified with magic practices, the paradigmatic form was the labyrinth, whose fractal twists were related to poetic practices. The second phase was the classical in the traditional sense: the architecture of Greece, then Rome, where the occult formulæ were written in the proportions and appropriation of music theory. In the third phase, represented in Western tradition by the Temple of Solomon built by the apocryphal Hiram and his sons, served as the sub-text for the projects of the Gothic, the fourth period. The architects of the 16c. Veneto revived parts of several of the preceding periods as classical texts were discovered, but the final phase sought new connections with the mathematics of the fourth dimension and the discoveries of Riemann and Lobochevsky and the spiritualism of Ouspensky and others. All periods have been 'syncretic' in their free borrowing from perceived antecedents and other traditions and forms; and all have sought independence from any overt historicisms, even to the point of advocating anachronism. Alliances with other sympathetic movements, such as Rosicrucianism, has left a confusing picture that has tempted most historians into finding a false local cause.

4. palindromes, fantastics, and banalities

The practice of Surrealism in ancient times seems absurd, but the principle of an artistic appropriation of dream logic is such a standard element of folk practices that it makes sense to consider 'pataphysics, technically coined by Alfred Jarry in 1893, as naturally applicable to Voudou techniques evolved from Yoruba medicine or the proto-classical myth of Castor and Pollux, the protective dieties of ancient Rome. As Leslie Desmangles notes in *Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti,* the Catholic account of creation embodied in the Book of John ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God …') correlated directly with the idea of creation from verbal formula. What kind of words? Clearly not conventional words with the standard referential meanings, but words that, like passwords, gained passage while preserving a secret. The diagram of the dream-structure of artistic meaning applies here as well. The 'crossing' of the lines of representation and suppressed significance (=secrets) are the anamorphic formula of the magic phrase and password as well. Descendents of these verbal calls-into-being are the palindrome ('Able was I ere I saw Elba') and the non-sense semi-palindromes of alchemy (Abracadabra). Built into the palindrome is the idea of the half-meaning freely given, the other half supplied through a process of discovery (almost exactly a description of Roussel's *procédé*).

Freud cited two main themes within the uncanny: optics and identity. With anamorphy, we have an optics that strays into acoustics (or, rather, acousmatics — the science of the voice *vis à vis* the issue of location). With identity the case of the double engages the ancient theme of twins. With the double comes variants that exploit the double theme in other media and contexts: travel through time, contamination of reality by the dream, and the story inside the story (*mise en abîme*). In all cases, it is the boundary that appears at first to make a distinction but which in fact has sealed in a center of absolute Otherness: Lacan's *extimité*. Poe's short story, 'The Masque of the Red Death', embodies this perfectly.

The consolidation of the uncanny around the surrealism of non-sense produces three main theme groups: (1) the mortuary, where the soul plays the traveller who must unravel the riddle guarding Eternity; (2) divination, a science for pre-scientific cultures, but carried over into modern popular culture through the idea of suspensions, mysteries, puzzles, etc.; and (3) the voice or call, which is woven throughout the other theme groups as an active thematic element. The parallel list of of anamorphy, monstrosity, and automaton intersect with this list, creating a variety of conditions and constructs that animate the interval 'between the two deaths' to such an extent that individual examples often seem completely unrelated.