

# Why No One Can Be Against Sustainability: Traversing the Fantasy of Sustenance Reveals a Surprisingly Universal Topology of Desire on Adaptive Reuse

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By nature, sustainability must claim a monopoly of belief: as a “belief” it cannot admit an opposite belief is equally valid. It is a consistent and universalist world-view, *Weltanschauung*. Its adherents act in accordance with one general principle: that it should be accepted by all persons. In practice, too, there is common action for sustainability, by governments, non-governmental organisations, loose groups of activists, and industry. The ability to unify diverse groups also suggests sustainability is an ideology, in a negative sense.

— Paul Treanor<sup>1</sup>

It’s often the case that a good idea is not an idea at all, but simply a way of seeing the world that excludes others by appearing to have an unquestionable rational basis. In a sense, it is more accurate to say that reasons emanate from conclusions rather than the other way around. For this reason, sustainability — arguably architecture’s most compelling contemporary aspect and a central component in nearly every educational program — should be regarded technically as a fantasy.<sup>2</sup> This is not intended to diminish sustainability as a topic or, even less, detract from the compelling environmental, social, political, ethical, or other (real) reasons for doing the things that march under the flag of sustainability. The term “fantasy” is the only means available to theory to approach sustainability to examine its grounds, its existence as a “human thing *par excellence*.”

A fantasy is, first and foremost, a means of stabilizing discourse. Anglo-American uses of fantasy emphasize its fictional and individual nature. In this sense even fantasy is subject to a political agenda directed towards subjectivity. But, fantasy is his-

torically and culturally just the opposite: a collective construct that is not only publically accessible but essential to maintain one’s position in any network of symbolic relations. A fantasy is like a free magazine subscription that, if refused, justifies a criminal investigation by the postal service. There are things we “must believe in” to be regarded as sane and moral. Questioning such things is impossible without serious consequences, for the simple reason that they are points of view rather than logical arguments. The subject must cover any logical gaps silently, obediently, to sustain the power of the point of view. As in the fable of the Emperor’s New Clothes, sustainability is a signifier that organizes other signifiers, a logic that works as long as it is not scrutinized too closely. The purpose of this essay is to look into sustainability as a fantasy without detracting from its effectiveness as an inspirational theme. This is intended as an archeology in the spirit of the “old Foucault,” in hopes that discourse, now foreclosed by the ideological role of sustainability, can develop a broader knowledge of the subject’s real condition.<sup>3</sup>

Why is there instability in discourse — instability that must be settled by fantasy? There is a slogan in psychoanalysis: “Anxiety never lies!” The problem of course is that anxiety never says what it really means. Its terms are chosen to obscure the real source of its concerns, so that when anxiety speaks you can be sure something’s wrong, but the language of its warning is purposefully misleading. Fantasy comes into this situation to compensate for anxiety’s inability to speak directly. Every fantasy involves a *recto* and *verso* version that re-

lates directly to the function of anxiety: a positive fantasy that is the public relations script and, beneath that, as a kind of anamorphic implant, what Slavoj Žižek has called the “dirty fantasy” to exploit anxiety’s a-symbolic dimensions.<sup>4</sup> For example, the 1990s “rhetoric” of the sports-utility vehicle touted its indestructibility and power features as acceptable compensation for its greater susceptibility to accidents due to its large, poorly balanced bulk. Although SUVs were more likely to generate accidents, the “dirty fantasy” was that it was better to kill the other driver, the real source of anxiety. Hence, the anxiety about the Other of the road is translated into the silent directive, “kill the Other first!” This is only an unofficial translation; the a-symbolic dirty fantasy can be realized only through images and *double-entendres*. In the case of the SUV, anxiety’s inability to say what it means can thus be described in terms of an official fantasy of sophisticated dashboard controls, reinforced steel frames, air bags, etc. and a set of vague undertones about the dangerous drivers “out there.” The subject is free to fill in the blanks of this dirty fantasy, about who those drivers are specifically.

Architectural theorists are not invulnerable to the lure of twinning positive and dirty fantasies. In her anthology on *Architecture of Fear*, Nan Ellin and other authors catalog the threats, and some of the recommended defensive actions, facing modern city dwellers.<sup>5</sup> Without overly challenging the idea of fear itself in true Rooseveltian fashion, the book accepts that bad things are really bad and we must do something to protect ourselves. The problem, the “dirty fantasy,” is Other People. Thanks to television, film, and other popular culture propaganda about Los Angeles, “we” are more or less aware of who those Others are.

With the smuggling of an anamorphic dirty fantasy inside the Trojan horse of the positive fantasy, anxiety moves into the category of ideology. As in the Steven Spielberg film, *Jaws* (1975), the shark becomes a means for organizing all of the “free radicals” floating about in the popular consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Is a rogue shark a sign of human incursion into the natural realm? Is it retribution for the greed of businessmen intent on keeping the beaches open at all costs? Who knows? The shark, at first a contingent feature of life in a sea-side town, ends up as the root of all evil; and as such it must be eradicated! The ideological efficiency of *Jaws* lies in its

combination of enunciation with the *point* of view. Like the New Age endorsement of multi-culturalism, the real claim is to be in the *position* to confer value-equality on other cultures. But, how has this privileged position been appropriated? What is the “perspective of perspectives” that has exempted it from being one of the cultures upon which it confers acceptability? In *Jaws*, the townsfolk adopt the generic identity of the simple peasants in search of Frankenstein’s composite monster, justified in their vigilante action by the very essence of the monster-as-monster.

#### FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO SUSTENANCE

There is a torch-and-pitchfork aspect of sustainability as well. Consider why no author in his or her right mind would entitle an article or book “Against Sustainability.” There is no rhetorical space for negative views once a topic has become ideology. This is why knifing apart the uncut pages of the sustainability book is important: on these pages are written the account of sustenance and its subversive role in the pre-ideological career of sustainability. Sustenance is not, as sustainability has been regarded, a coming-to-terms with nature. *It is a use of nature in the subject’s own coming-to-terms with the human*. Sustenance offers a supplement to the ideological appeal of sustainability, because it promises to keep open the *gap* that lies at and defines the heart of sustenance, which is the subject’s involvement with the world *as subject*, not as simply a consumer in need of protection from threats real and imagined.

Sustenance is a congeries of terms and ideas. Sustenance involves, for its own positive fantasy, an ideology of purpose and accomplishment against a background of human actualization. Sustenance in its positive form promotes the fundamental notion of nourishment; the idea of security; the promise of “extra benefits” of happiness and tranquility. Virgil’s long poem, *The Georgics*, was possibly the first major Western work to give voice to the positive fantasy of sustenance.<sup>7</sup> The gods have left the human scene. Humans are left behind to manage. We have to assist the bees make the best honey, assist the vine in its destiny to produce top quality wine, manage the fertility of the earth and purity of the water. There is no evil to combat, except possibly insects, storm damage, and other obstacles dropping into the space opened up by the departing gods.

The “dirty fantasy” beneath Virgil’s *recto* might be, for many, the neo-evangelical version of “Left Behind.”<sup>8</sup> This is the X-rated version of the “dirty fantasy” of sustenance that forces us to have it out with the Others who we knew all along were the root of our troubles but, because of imposed rules of political correctness, we were unable to exterminate when we had the chance. Now, with not just God but his righteous believers out of the way, we are free to enter into a Darwinian winner-take-all struggle. It is time for the secularists, who had refused religion, to face the music and realize that there is “real evil” out there. The challenge is to avoid making it appear as if we have a choice between the nice and nasty fantasy but, rather, to see the two fantasies as structurally related. The structure, in fact, is created at a level of consciousness that might be considered fundamental, and an archaeology of sustenance, as a structure combining two apparently opposed fantasies, might lead us back to some theoretical perspective on the otherwise ideologically compelling subject of sustainability.

THE GAPPED CIRCLE

Here follows a conjecture that might be at any point so crammed with citations that any reader trying to follow the footnotes might have difficulty being an imaginative co-author of the discussion. Diagrams, especially ones that suggest several interpretations, invite the kind of skepticism required for the reader to act as a *bricoleur*, as Claude Lévi-Strauss might have put it. The diagram able to invite the reader into an imagination experiment is that of the gapped circle.

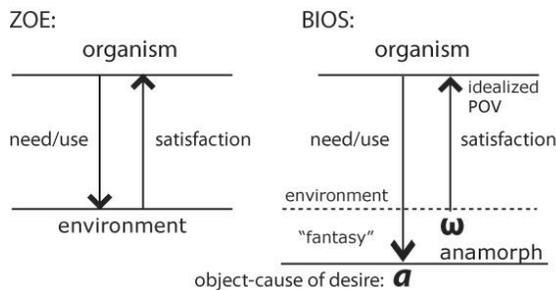


Figure 1. When demand exceeds need in the human “bios,” a space opens up that is held open by fantasy, which sees in the new “anamorphic” object a correlative idealized point of view.

The statement “demand exceeds need” would be the appropriate motto over the door of the human

condition. Shelter, food, and procreative success — this triad of most species’ sustainability formula, *zoē*, — is “never enough” for cultures that, through their symbolic capacities (*bios*), invent anxieties different from animal fear. A minimum definition of that difference might be that humans are able to separate the function of use value from that of exchange value.<sup>9</sup> “Use” is the direct material response to a need, an engagement, a transaction. “Use” is what allows something to become a part of a network of symbolic relationships. Exchange would be like a price tag except that the vector is a-symbolic and “silent.” The price is not listed. Separating use and exchange results in the totem and the fetish. Another part is the well-known re-assignment of everything — sex, food, appearance, behavior, etc. — to “accounting systems” that place subjects within networks of symbolic relationships.<sup>10</sup> Subjects find their places within roles invented to support the use-exchange system.

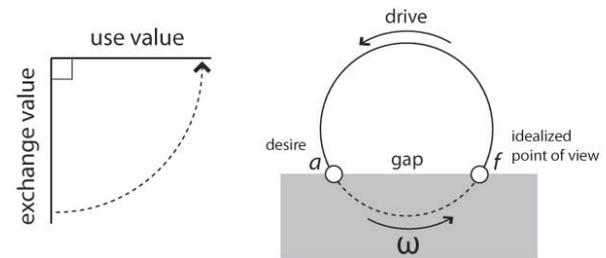


Figure 2. The 90° relationship between use and exchange opens up a gap in the “natural world” of humans that forces desire into a circle whose surplus/lack is structured in visual and narrative ways.

Demand, an excess going beyond the needs of sustainability, depends on anxiety as a fuel. Ideology inserts exchange into every use. Like a fractal or virus, this insertion converts nature into culture. A diagram preceding the gapped circle would be that of two vectors, use and exchange, bound by an orthogonal hinge. The 90° angle keeps open the silent relationship between the two: the price of something is never fixed by use; it is always re-definable by culture, subject to flux, to re-pricing. This gap is held open because there is no “fixed price menu.” Use becomes symbolic not by setting a price but by concealing value. There can be no clearer example of this than the example of “silent trade,” practiced widely in antiquity and still used in parts of Asia. The parties of a trade never meet. One leaves an object at a designated site, another replaces it with an object of equivalent

value. If the value is perceived to be unequal, adjustment is made in the next trading cycle. The insertion of uncertainty into the valuing of use (= domestication of need) creates an opening, which is filled (symbolically) by the dimensions of space and time that “register” optional outcomes in terms of a charged field-of-play. This is not to argue for an “idealist” theory of reality *per se* but rather to use the Wittgensteinian point that *this* space and *this* time is the specificity of time and space, grounded on the contingency set out in advance by cultural directives and subjective adaptations.<sup>11</sup> It may be the case that only the specific case exists and the general does not — that the abstractions we regard as the guarantors of objective reality are, like the idea of credit, convenient fictions.

The orthogonal angle of use value and exchange value opens up and specifies dimensions of a space and time for humans who perceive it as the “givens” of material reality. The orthogonal element keeps the circle from being closed, as it would be for animals who communicate using signifiers fixed (mostly) to their referents.<sup>12</sup> This opening locates the “dirty fantasy” whose job is not to close or cross it, but to keep it permanently open by inserting a space within a space that, concealed (as is the exchange value, the hidden price), exhibits a striking architecture that can be recognized in cultures from ancient times to the present. The gapped circle creates a sub-segment of space and time materialized by the motion of a quest, puzzle, exile — a “journey of discovery” structured by coincidences, symmetries, *Doppelgängers*, and clues. It is the liminal space-outside-of-space used by cultures for instruction, initiation, meditation, and sacred isolation. The curse (= “course,” or circle) best describes its geometry and its magic affiliations; the spell (cf. G. *Spiel*) denotes its extension in a time and space structured by narrative.

In the ancient Greek house, the hearth was this place sustained by secret narrative, presided over by the women of the household who were the representatives of Hestia, “wedded to the flame” as were the Vestals of Rome, responsible for the conversations, paid for in burned fat, with the dead ancestors (*manes*) who protected the home. The hearth was shielded from the view of strangers. Alternatively, it may have been that the secular life of the family needed protection from the *manes*’ volatile gaze.<sup>13</sup> True to the “silent” role of exchange

(Hermes, the god of commerce, was typically shown with his finger to his lips), the gap was invisible from any point outside. Its perceptual dimensions could be opened only with verbal formulas — passwords — accompanied by some token gift (hence, the role of the offering).

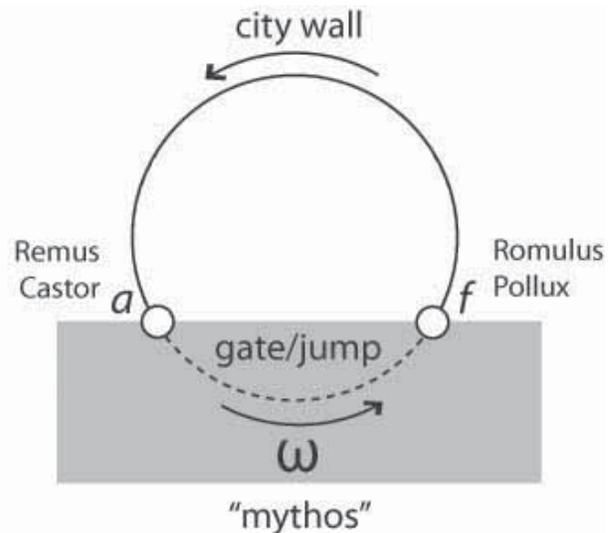


Figure 3. The “anamorphosis” of the gap can be materialized in visual or narrative ways. Here, it is an approach to myth using such “stereognostic” theme of twins. Rome was founded by twins (Romulus and Remus) and later protected by the twin Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux. The use of twins to structure the gapped circle is “stereognostic” — a puzzled relationship between two minimally different parts.

This cursed surplus space had the property of converting from inside to outside.<sup>14</sup> The Roman Forum, for example, began its life not as a civic center but as the periphery to the seven tribes who used it as a common burial ground. It was marginal to “all” taken one at a time but central to the “all” realized as a unity in the act of the foundation of Rome. The particulars of that narrative involve the theme of twins, Romulus and Remus, the element of sacrifice (Remus’s murder), the creation of a symmetrical space coincident with religious spells, and — last but not least — the inclusion of gaps (gates) as Romulus lifted the plow to allow connection of inside and outside. Although this latter feature would seem to be just a convenience item, it was itself a complex restatement of the whole act of foundation. Traditions surrounding the gate as the consummate example of what Lacan would christen “the extimate” (an out-of-doors version of

intimacy) consistently link the function of passage with verbal formulas, uncanny in-between-ness, and mortification. As modern an artist as the astute Michaelangelo was able to capture the irony of the gate in his Porta Pia, a fractal of the city, a building turned inside out.

Compared to the “life” of ordinary space and time, the gap of the gapped circle becomes, in literature, the death narrative, a quest for the *gnosis* of the dead. The tradition of sibyls, who sat at the edge of this space, gives the clue that this *gnosis* could be uttered only in riddle or irony. The Oracle at Delphi presided over a flame regarded as the center of the world (omphalos), symbolized by a conical stone statue derived from the practice of shaping the ashes of the night fire in preparation for the next day. The relation of the oracle to language gives a clue: the sibyl spoke “outside” of the denotative and connotative functions of ordinary speech. Hers

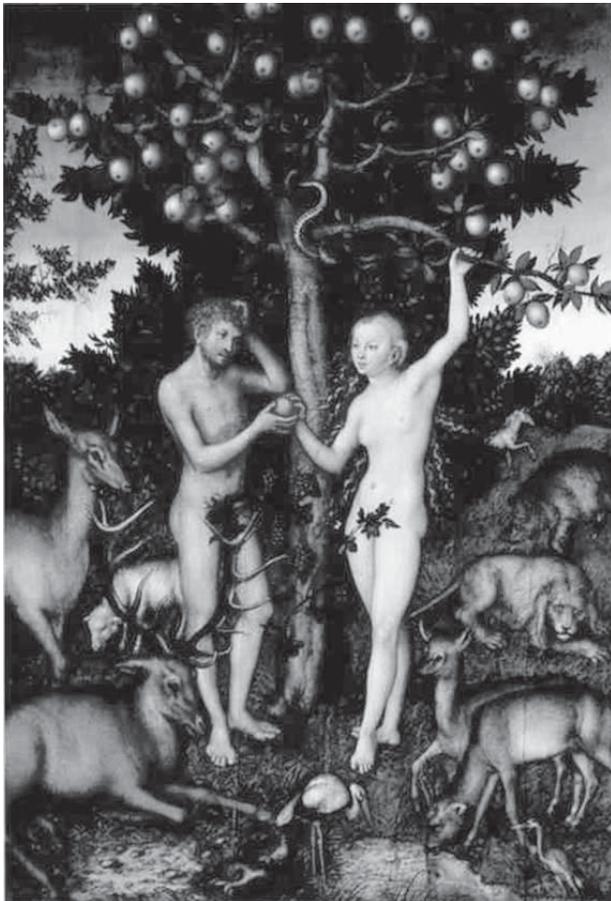


Figure 4. “Adam and Eve,” Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1526. Courtauld Institute, London.

was a voice empowered by ventriloquism, a voice that is a resistant kernel of non-meaning inside language’s phonemic semiotics. This kernel, in all cultures, becomes the official voice of the dead.

The marginal-yet-central placement of the gap lays bare the function of placement itself. The “where” of the gap is a nowhere, but it is also a central nowhere. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous story about looking for the tardy friend, Pierre, in a restaurant, Pierre is *not there* in a way that makes the negative into a positive force field. Guests in the restaurant are summoned to a screen, asked to stand apart from the ground as the figure, Pierre, but they fail and fall back into the ground.<sup>15</sup> This spectral summons is more than a failed experiment. It is a Hegelian “tarrying with the negative,” which is to say that the negative *is* this experience of tarrying, duration, in the absence of conventionalized meaning, space, and time. It is the “hard time” of prison, the slow architecture of exchange described so well by Kafka in his pivotal novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. It is the “feel free to go anywhere” space of Piranesi’s *Carceri*, the imaginary prisons of infinite extent. These matters of placement, voice, extimacy, and curse are brought together in the ultimate sustenance narrative, the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

#### EDEN TOPOLOGY: TEMPLE OR LABYRINTH

In the Garden of Eden (Fig. 4), God is only marginally present. His footsteps can be heard rustling from time to time, but he has by and large left Adam and Eve alone to enjoy their fully furnished sustainable home — the ultimate green architecture. In a sense, this returns us to our original concern about anxiety always telling the truth but not in terms we readily understand. Eden’s use value is more like the legal term of usufruct: “You can use it as long as you don’t waste it.” The exchange value is the covenant’s codicil, “Don’t eat from the tree of knowledge!”

The space and time of Eden are held open through the “moment” between the two statements. An uncertain circularity develops. We are given a space and time to “think about it” before exchange collapses onto use (the vectors will coincide once the serpent makes his argument, that the true value of Eden is this one fruit). The space of Eden, and its time, circulate around its own “impossible-Real”

condition, the Tree of Knowledge. The circle has a gap, just as the serpent, cousin to the Uroboros whose self-referential credentials are well known, is a boundary with a face, a rule with an exception.

We know the story. Eve is, according to her initial creation and later role in converting Eden to Wilderness, "extimate," a "subjective object." In some ways, Eve and the serpent are roommates in the sense that, through the partnership of knowledge and space, they keep open the gap that allows free choice, motility, and all that is based on them — which, incidentally, the labyrinth represents as a meandered boundary.

Virgil's margin is in most ways the same as the *zimzum* of Yahweh's evacuation.<sup>16</sup> Whether it is the invisibility of God in the garden or the subsequent more radical absence, it is a margin to be completed by humans. Virgil is optimistic. We can fill the margin with the arts of husbandry, of taking care of the earth (this is the positive fantasy of sustainability). The Bible and, hence, the evangelicals of the "left-behind" school, see it as a neurotic space. The term "stereognosis" comes closest to describing how this space challenges knowledge with its puzzle of minimally differentiated "halves." Adam-Eve, Castor-Pollux, the Dioscuri, etc. are really parts of an "anamorphosis system" that supplies content to the gap created between disguise/blindness and gnosis. The evangelical left-behind version is more vivid than Virgil's: it involves what René Girard has called the unavoidable violence of semblance.<sup>17</sup>

How can the two fantasies be reconciled? According to ecologists in the tradition of Howard Odum, sustenance is a circle that must be completed. Inputs and outputs, in terms of both energy and material, must add up to zero. Any remainder is passed on to the next system of equilibration, until finally the universe balances the books. New Age sustainability enthusiasts point to accounting frequently to underscore the idea of the zero-sum game, which in theological terms of *zimzum* means no presence without an absence.

My speculation may have made it seem as if sustenance is a subjective issue, not the imposed condition of limited resources and unstable global conditions that forces us to respond creatively to discover some workable new arrangements. Global warming, resource shortages, and geo-political in-

equities are not illusions, unfortunately. But, the terminology we use to frame and define complex issues that are barely understandable is not only "in our head," it *is* our head; it *is* our way of thinking that establishes our collective political agenda. Sustainability fills the role of a "master signifier" that, like the shark in *Jaws*, organizes loose details and unproved assertions. What is striking is that sustainability, as an argument for duration, is the *classic* form of the circular drive: an aim that purposefully *keeps its goal empty* in order to sustain its motion. There is no ideal that sustainability seeks, but this lack provides the plenum of structure that connects narrative traditions, cuisine, foundation traditions, and modern practices based on contemporary anxieties. Sustainability, to put it plainly, is the temporal aspect of our cultural neurosis. Its lack of an assigned object ("Sustainability of \_\_\_\_?") keeps open its perennial ideological potential.

The structure of the gapped circle creates highways between the points of the constellation of the human subject. Perhaps this is why sustainability can be so personally felt and, at the same time, a common cause connecting diverse large groups and even nations. The role of the double (the *two* fantasies, theme of twins, "stereo-gnostic" elements, etc.) should alert us however to the concealed dimensions of ideology. The "dirty fantasy" will not go away; its un-namability is what keeps the gap open, what allows the field of perception its durability. Public policy tends to delude itself about the dirty fantasy's existence; but those in the way of its materializations will, like the Others of the SUV, continue to die nonetheless.

## ENDNOTES

1. Paul Treanor, "Why Sustainability Is Wrong," World Wide Web, <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/sustainability.html>. Last accessed December 11, 2008.
2. At the root of sustainability's theoretical problem is its (unintended) presumption that there is unity of motive of "unsustainable" practices, against which the opposite motive can be argued. "The unsustainable" is, of course, not a set of coordinated practices but rather a characterization that frames a number of unrelated phenomena from a new point of view that is retroactively projected on to historical practices that have been, in retrospect, sustainable or unsustainable.
3. This essay's position will be mistaken for ideology, too, unless the reader understands the proper meaning of fantasy. Anglo-American psychology has been

dominated by “ego-psychology,” the theoretical opposite of Lacanian psychoanalysis more broadly understood in Europe. The fantasy of the individual, for ego-psychology, inevitably refers to delusion, and treatment aims to dispel delusion. The spiritualistic New Age attitude of self-help is then able, on this account, to merge with its antipode, theoretical physics. Both isolate the subject as a unit of discursive decisiveness. Lacanian approaches give fantasy its due, so to speak, and help the subject identify with his/her social relations. The bias against fantasy in Anglo-American literature has hampered its incorporation into theory and trivialized such topics as imagination and the dream.

4. Slavoj Žižek, Rex Butler, and Scott Stephens, *Interrogating the Real* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p. 60.

5. Nan Ellin, *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architecture Press, 1997).

6. Fredric Jameson aptly observed: “[T]he vocation of the symbol —the killer shark — lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb and organize all of these quite distinct anxieties together. As a symbolic vehicle, then, the shark must be understood in terms of its essentially polysemous function rather than any particular content attributable to it by this or that spectator. Yet it is precisely this polysemousness which is profoundly ideological, insofar as it allows essentially social and historical anxieties to be folded back into apparently ‘natural’ ones, both to express and to be recontained in what looks like a conflict with other forms of biological existence.” Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 26-27.

7. Virgil (Vergilius Maro), *The Georgics of Virgil*, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

8. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998).

9. The terms use value and exchange value come from Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), pp. 42-46. Marx: “We have seen that when commodities are exchanged, their exchange value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use-value” (p. 45).

10. The discovery of the inexplicable valuation of trivial objects marks the beginning of modern anthropology. Marcel Mauss’s study of the fetish nearly coincided with Freud’s study of the totem, laying the groundwork for Claude Lévi-Strauss’s groundbreaking study of food customs. Triviality, these studies agree, is the essence of the unconscious. In this sense, anthropology and psychoanalysis coincided with art’s turn to the trivial in Surrealism and Cubism.

11. This point requires a distinction between the abstract idea of space and time and specific “contingent”

experiences of space and time, the notion of “event” or “encounter.” The analogy in linguistic theory would be to argue for merging the “Chomskian” view of universal structures and the “Whorfian” idea of adaptability based on cultural differences. Ludwig Wittgenstein anticipated the need for such a blended theory in his *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1967).

12. Lacan emphasized that signifiers refer not to concrete things but, rather, to other signifiers. This reversed Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea of the signified by showing how signifiers form chains of meanings that slide until they are “quilted” in a process that retroactively revises meaning in a final act of “punctuation.” Lacanian quilting calls attention to the “anamorphic” role of quilting and its relation to the gapped circle, as a means of using fantasy to compensate for the gap between desire and need. See Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Écrits, The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 416.

13. It would be more accurate to say that, in mythic thought at least, blindness and invisibility are more or less interchangeable. Since one and the same barrier accomplishes both the concealing of the hearth from the visitor’s view and the concealing of the visitor from the hearth’s view, the real function may be to exchange invisibility for blindness or *vice versa*.

14. The theme of the uncanny looms large in sustenance’s gapped logic because it is, as Mladen Dolar noted, at its heart a blurring of the distinction between inside and outside. Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October*, 58, *Rendering the Real* (Autumn, 1991): 5-23.

15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 9-10.

16. The term “zimzum” is the name in the Jewish mystical book, *The Zohar*, describing God’s necessary contraction to make room for creation, popularized by Harold Bloom in his book *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

17. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1979).