



Regarding Uncertainty

Creative Ambivalence

by Rona Rangsach

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Ambivalence

Origin:

Coined by Swiss psychologist Eugen Bleuler ~1910

Ambivalence = state of the human mind

- affective ambivalence: positive and negative feelings about the same object
- conative ambivalence: inability to choose between desires / needs
- cognitive ambivalence: attachment to incompatible ideas / beliefs

Use today:

Semiotic expansion: Ambivalence of external features of the world

Subjective ambivalence:

Reaction of a subject to the ambivalence of an external feature

Ambivalence

Definition:

Ambivalence = simultaneous relevance of two opposing concepts/values inherent to a single situation / object / phenomenon

Opposition: contrary or contradictory (mutually exclusive)

Effect: energetic tension between poles

Distinction from Ambiguity:

Ambiguity:

- two opposite yet equally “choosable” options
- implies arbitrariness: A *or* B
- both opposing values are present but not necessarily relevant

Ambivalence:

- no arbitrariness: A *and* B
- both opposing values are relevant

Ambivalence

Distinction from Dichotomy:

Dichotomy:

- division of one whole into two contradictory parts (mutually exclusive & exhaustive)
- no implication of simultaneous relevance of the opposites
- irritation from “undecidables” acts as energy drain

Ambivalence:

- poles contrary or contradictory
- simultaneous relevance of opposites
- tension as energy source

Distinction from Duality:

Duality = Dichotomy on a doctrinal basis

Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Productive Noise

Ambivalence = tension between two poles

- ▶ Parallel in communication theory: mediation between two communicating ends

Stephen Crocker (2007: 4): “Noise is the presence of the medium.”

Michel Serres. *The Parasite* (1982):

Noise, by adding chance to the predictable, allows for the creation of something new.

Noise is not simply an obstacle, but a productive force around which the system is reorganized (Crocker 2007).

Sean Cubitt (2014: 2): “Mediation is the ground of relationship, the relationship that precedes and constructs subjects and objects.”

↪ **Ambivalence as creative, productive & constitutive concept**

Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Hegel's Dialectics

No arbitrary appearance of new premises from outside required, once the old ones are proven to be contradictory ▶ Potential in the contradiction itself

3 Moments (Maybee 2016):

1. Moment of understanding:

Concepts / forms have seemingly stable definition or determination

2. “Dialectical” moment:

Instability: determination of concepts / forms passes into its opposite

3. “Speculative” moment:

Acceptance of the opposition; understanding of the unity of opposing determinations

▶ enablement of speculating about new possibilities

→ Ambivalence as enabling & creative process

Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Paradox à la Deleuze

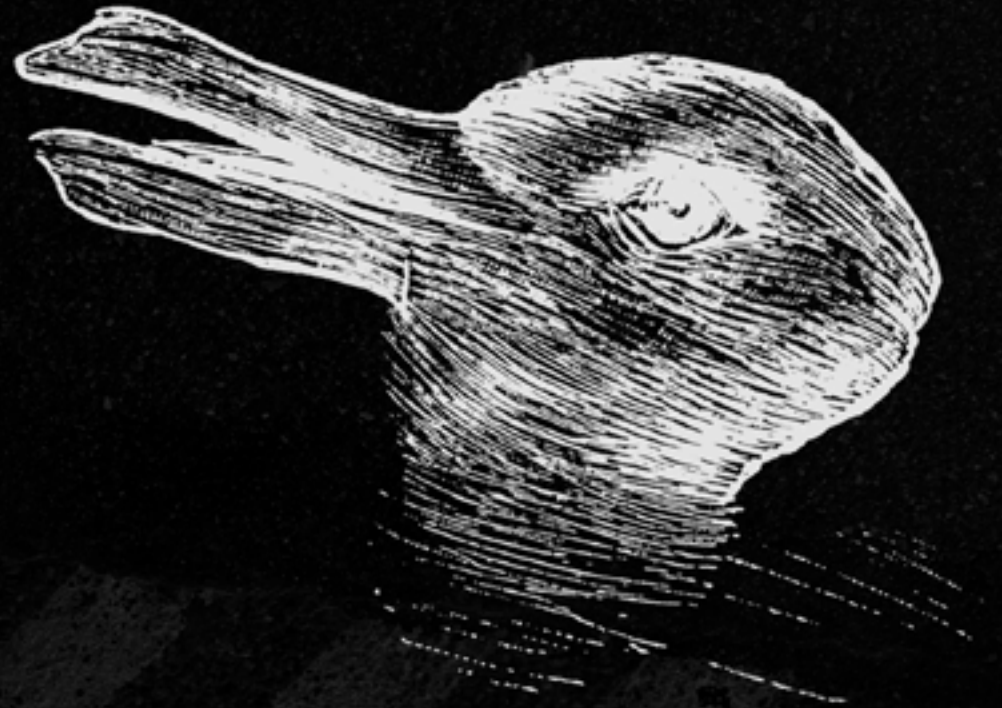
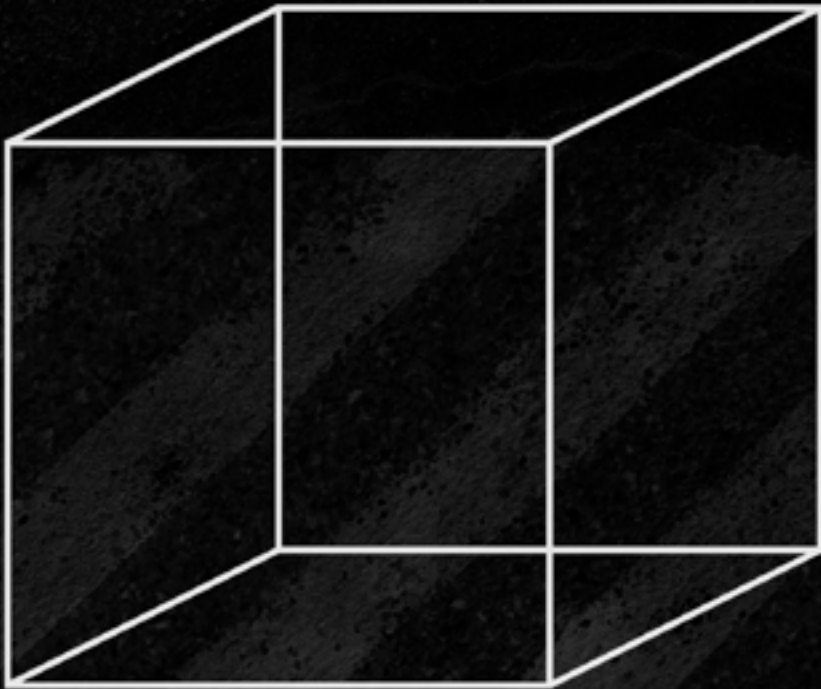
Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969):

- Contradiction occurs when a paradox is transferred from the realm of the impossible to the realm of the possible and real.
- The paradox itself is not contradictory, it embraces both poles, “it moves in both directions at once” (3).
- ▶ Accepting the contradiction, looking at it like a paradox, can enable the development of new and productive trajectories of thought beyond what is usually considered “possible.”

→ **Ambivalence as creative concept**

Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Ambivalent images



Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Ambivalent images

- can be “read” in two opposing ways
- foster mental disposition different from looking at non-ambivalent images

Experimental psychology (Klintman 1984):

high reversal rate = high potential for originality of thinking and creativity

- corrupt presupposition that (non-abstract) images are single-faceted representations
 - ▶ Consider ambivalent images as unitary.

“I *may* say ‘It’s a duck-rabbit.’” (Wittgenstein 1953: 195)

Creative reassessment of

- “the whole business of seeing” (Ibid: 212)
- the significations and potentialities of images

→ **Ambivalence as creative & enabling process**



Concepts with parallels to Ambivalence

Riding a bike

- At rest: instability between two opposing sides
- Pedalling towards destination inbetween opposing sides ▶ instability is overcome
- Balance is enhanced with speed
 - ▶ self-enhanced enablement

Physics:

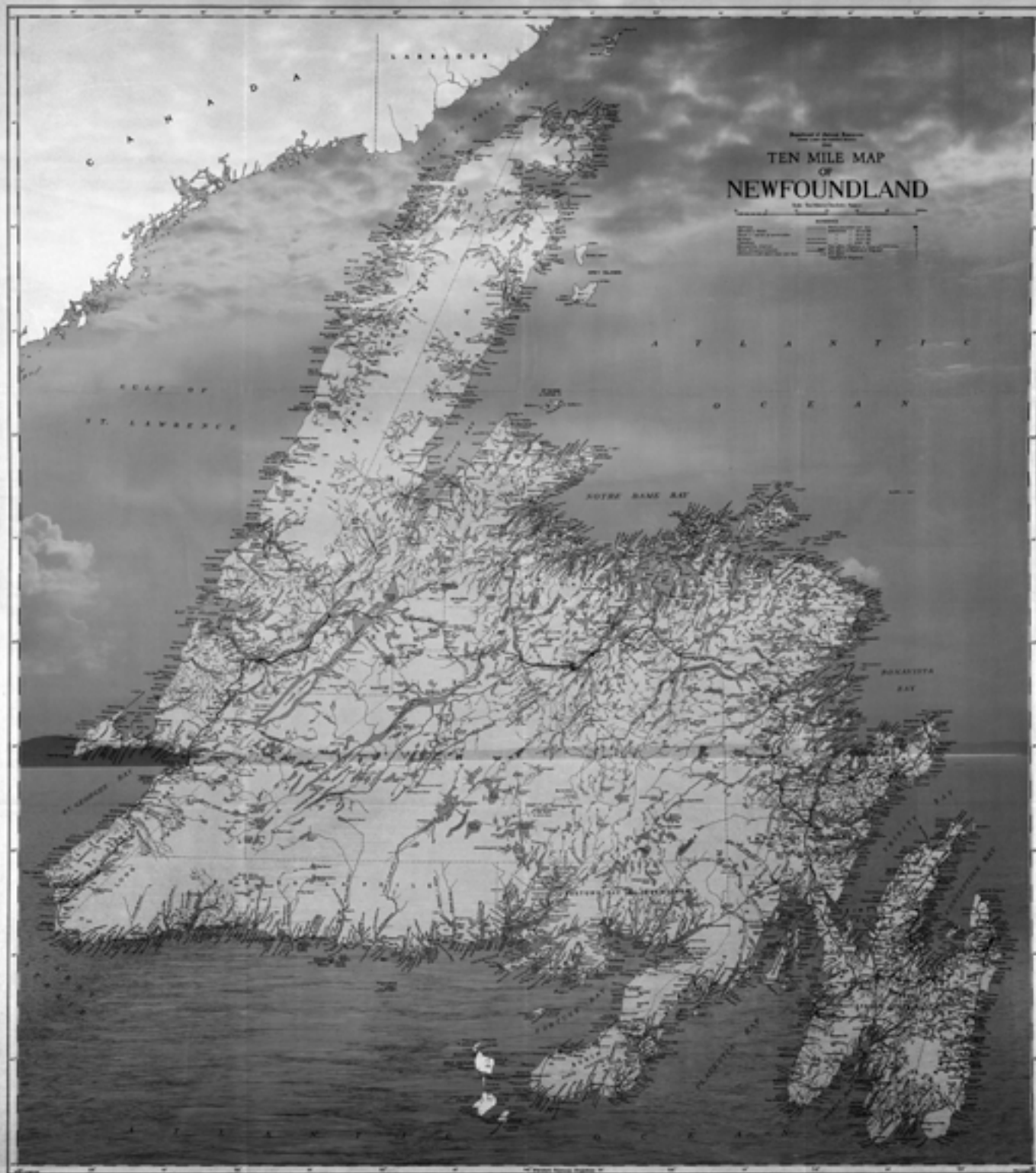
wheels = gyroscopes

Conservation of angular momentum: tilting provokes uprighting

Increasing speed: larger angular momentum ▶ larger uprighting forces

↪ **Ambivalence as self-enhanced enabling process**

This Harbour is accessible when the ice is out. It is very narrow, with good anchorage, in 7 fathoms, mud. It contains no inhabitants who carry on the fishery with success. The islands are in general low & nearly barren, abundance of fire wood & but water is scarce.



North End

Gravel Island

Spit of Land

From the North
the whole
island is visible



Examples of Creative Ambivalence

Newfoundland Studies Movement

Smallwood era (1949 - 1972):

Ambivalence of “modernization” & “preservation”

Memorial University established to be an agent for both (Webb 2016)

→ Emergence of the Newfoundland Studies Movement

- highly interdisciplinary
- extremely creative & productive

ISER series of outport ethnographies (Philbrook, Szwed, Faris, Ben-Dor, Firestone, Chiaramonte, Mars 1965-1968)

The Fogo Process (National Film Board & Memorial University's Extension Service 1967)

Historical Fence Building (Matthews 1971)

Dictionary of Newfoundland English (Story, Kirwin, Widdowson 1982)

Examples of Creative Ambivalence

Newfoundland Cultural Revival

late 1960s - 1980s:

Rebellion against erosion of traditional culture and federal government:

Revalorization of local identity / nostalgia / conservatism

Hippie movement:

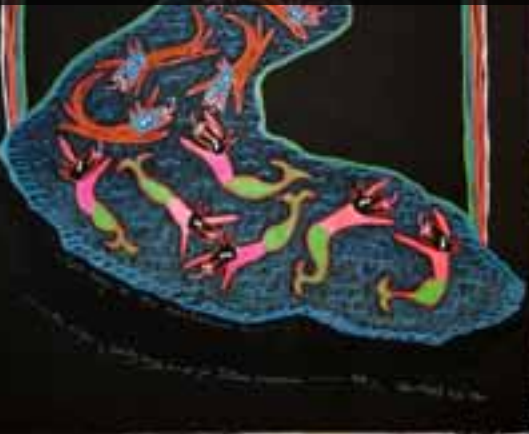
Engagement for peace / social change / antiauthoritarianism / global communality

Ambivalence of “conservatism / nostalgia” & “socialism / experimentation”

→ Highly creative & productive, multi-disciplinary arts scene
“The Newfoundland Renaissance” (Gwyn 1976)



David Blackwood | Manfred Buchheit | CODCO | Marlene Creates | Tom Dawe | Figgy Duff | Pam Hall | Percy Janes
Mike Jones | Marilyn Koop | Frank Lapointe | NIFCO | Al Pittman | Gerald Squires | The Mummers Troupe | Don Wright



Creative Ambivalence

What we have found:

Ambivalence

- is a distinct, clearly defined concept.
- bears the potential for creativity & productivity.
- allows for the transformation of an initial imbalance into one of dynamic and enabling balance.
- is a phenomenon whose creative / productive utilization may be practiced and internalized.
- fosters inter- and cross-disciplinarity by making us think outside the box.

Facing ambivalence, while indicating the need for alertness and open-mindedness, ultimately holds the prospect of creativity, productivity, and a dynamic, self-enhancing balance.

“Evimbalance”

Creative Ambivalence

References

- Crocker, Stephen. 2007. Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben. In *1000 Days of Theory*, Eds. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. 1-16.
- Cubitt, Sean. 2014. *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels*. Cambridge MA; London: The MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1990 (1969). *The Logic of Sense*, Transl. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, Ed. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Klintman, Holger. 1984. "Original Thinking and Ambiguous Figure Reversal Rates," in *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, Vol.22(2): 129-131.
- Maybee, Julie E. 2016. "Hegel's Dialectics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Electronic document. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics>. accessed June 3, 2018.
- Serres, Michel. 1982. *The Parasite*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Webb, Jeff A. 2016. *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfoundland Culture, 1950-1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1984 (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.