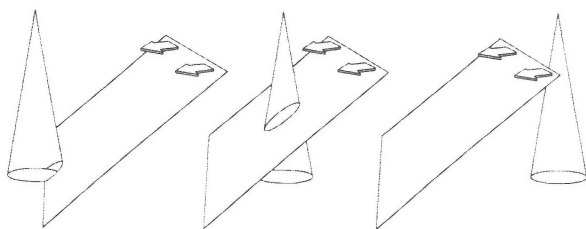


CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
THE MUSEUM OF JURASSIC TECHNOLOGY

GEOFFREY SONNABEND

—
OBLISCENCE: THEORIES OF FORGETTING
and
THE PROBLEM OF MATTER



AN ENCAPSULATION
by
Valentine Worth

SUPPLEMENT TO A CHAIN OF FLOWERS
Vol V, No.5
Guide Leaflet No. 3

Fourth Edition, abridged

THE MUSEUM OF JURASSIC TECHNOLOGY - LOS ANGELES

GEOFFREY SONNABEND'S

*Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting
and the Problem of Matter*

AN ENCAPSULATION

BY
VALENTINE WORTH

WITH
DIAGRAMMATIC ILLUSTRATIONS

BY
SONA DORA

SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF
USEFUL INFORMATION - WEST COVINA

PUBLISHED BY THE TRUSTEES

1964

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information Press

*Billings Bogota Bhopal Beirut
Bowling Green Buenos Aires Cambridge
Dayton Dar es Salaam Dusseldorf
Fort Wayne Indianapolis Lincoln
Malen Beg Malen Mor
Nannin Pretoria Teheran
Socorro Terra Haute Ulster*

*Published in the United States by
The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information
The Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles
9341 Venice Blvd, Culver City, CA 90232
in mf@mjt.org
<http://www.mjt.org>*

*Published in cooperation with the Visitors to the Museum
by the Delegates of the Press*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
069'.0693775 AP 101.0794*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Main entry under title:*

*Geoffrey Sonnabend: Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting
Museum of Jurassic Technology
Simons, Sarah
Rossi, M. Francis
Drake, Diana
Wilson, David*

*Museum of Jurassic Technology
AP 101.0794 093'.06937'8 88-73932
ISBN: 0-17-731315-7*

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Printed in the United States of America

Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter

— AN ENCAPSULATION —

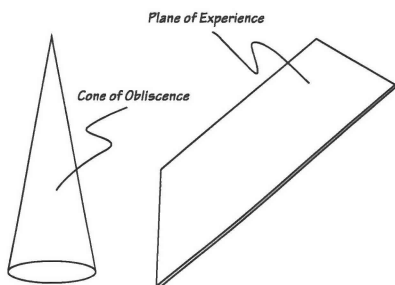
In April, 1991, the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California, opened the Delani/Sonnabend Halls – a series of exhibits detailing the lives and works of two extraordinary individuals: Madalena Delani, a singer of art songs and operatic material, and Geoffrey Sonnabend, a memory researcher and neurophysiologist. The exhibits also document the effect that Madalena Delani's work had upon the formation of Geoffrey Sonnabend's theories of forgetting as described in his controversial publication *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*.

In his three-volume work *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*, Geoffrey Sonnabend departed from all previous memory research with the premise that memory is an illusion. Forgetting, he believed, not remembering, is the inevitable outcome of all experience. From this perspective,

"We, amnesiacs all, condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time and the irretrievability of its moments and events."¹

Sonnabend did not attempt to deny that the experience of memory existed. However, his entire body of work was predicated on the idea that what we experience as memories are in fact confabulations—artificial constructions of our own design built around sterile particles of retained experience which we attempt to make live again by infusions of imagination, much as the blacks and whites of old photographs are enhanced by the addition of colors or tints in an attempt to add life to a frozen moment.

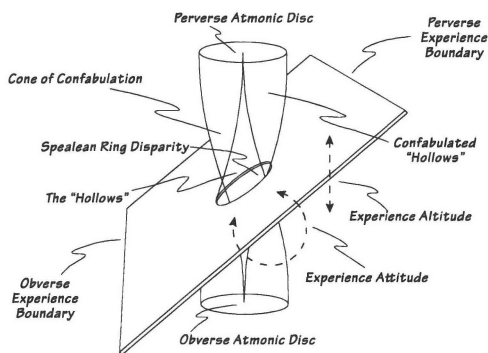
¹ Geoffrey Sonnabend, *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1946), pp. 16



1.1 The basic Sonnabend Diad—characteristic cone and plane of experience

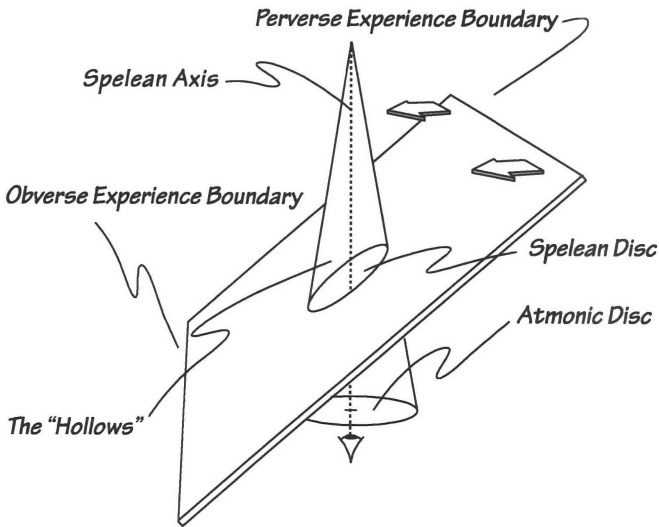
experience. Interestingly, however, Sonnabend employed the term “true memory” to describe this process of decay which, he held, was in actuality not memory at all.

Sonnabend believed that this phenomenon of “true memory” was our only connection to the past—if only the immediate past—and, as a result, he became obsessed with understanding the mechanisms of “true memory” by which experience decays. In an effort to illustrate his understanding of this process, Sonnabend, over the next several years, constructed an elaborate Model of Obliscence (or model of forgetting) which, in its simplest form, can be seen as the intersection of a plane and cone (1.1). It is this model that Sonnabend first came to understand during the sleepless night in September, 1936, at the Iguassu Falls. By the end of his life this model reflected a complex of forms and designations including such terms as the Cone of Confabulation, the Perverse and Obverse Atmonic Discs, Spelean Ring Disparity and the attitude and altitude of experience (1.2).



1.2 The complete Sonnabend Model of Obliscence as realized by the end of Sonnabend’s Research.

2 *ibid.*, pp. 141



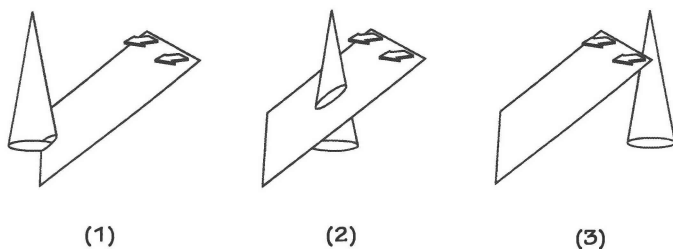
1.3 Geoffrey Sonnabend's Model of Obliscence, detailing the basic elements of cone, plane, and discs.

In its most basic form, Sonnabend's Model of Obliscence consists of two elements: the Cone of Obliscence, and the Plane of Experience (sometimes also known as Plane Experience) (1.3).

All living things have a Cone of Obliscence by which the being experiences experience. This cone is sometimes also known as the Cone of True Memory (and occasionally the Characteristic Cone). Sonnabend speaks of this cone as if it were an organ like the pancreas or spleen and, like those organs, its shape and characteristics are unique to the individual and remain relatively consistent over time. This cone (occasionally referred to as a horn) is composed of two elements: the Atmonic Disc (or base of the cone) which Sonnabend described as "the field of immediate consciousness of an individual" and the "hollows" (or interior of the cone). A third implied element of the Characteristic Cone is the Spelean Axis, an imaginary line which passes through the tip of the cone and the center of the Atmonic Disc. The Spelean Axis can be thought of as the individual's line of sight or perspective, with the eye of the individual firmly held at the intersection of the Spelean Axis and the Atmonic Disc.

The second element of the basic Sonnabend Diad—the Plane of Experience—is far more dynamic. Planes of Experience are always in motion, always (in Class I planes) moving from the Obverse Experience Boundary (or leading edge) to the Perverse Experience Boundary (or trailing edge).

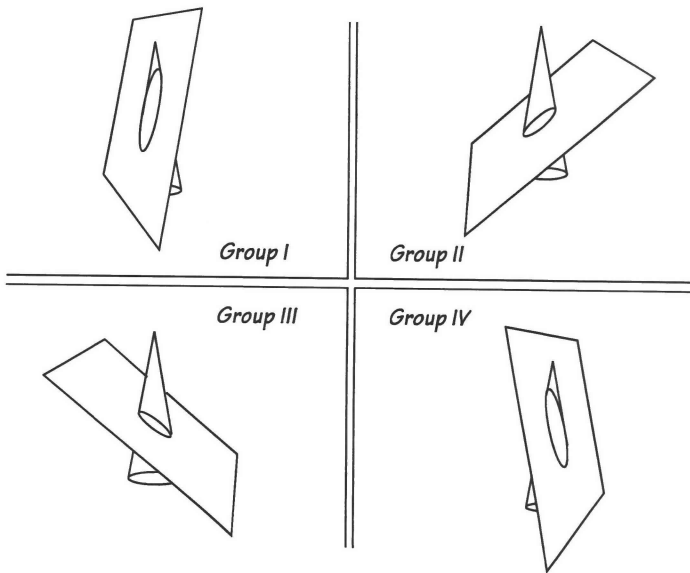
In the course of its migration, the path of a plane will cause it to intersect the less dynamic Cone of Obliscence. The intersection of the plane and cone creates what Sonnabend called the Spelean Ring (or Spelean Disc). When such an intersection occurs, a three-tier series of events ensues, which (from our perspective) would be described as:



- (1) being involved in an experience
- (2) remembering an experience
- (3) having forgotten an experience

Under “normal” circumstances, the Obverse (or leading) Experience Boundary is the first element of the plane to cross the Atmonic Disc. This situation creates the condition we describe as *being involved in an experience*. Once the Obverse Experience Boundary clears the Atmonic Disc, we say that we *remember the experience*. And when the Perverse Experience Boundary clears the cone altogether, and we no longer “truly remember” the experience we say we have *frgotten the experience*. From our perspective, at the intersection of the spelean axis with the atmonic disc, this series of events is seen as a progressively constricting or diminishing disc—in other words, experiences pass and memories fade.

Every Experience Plane has a pitch or attitude as well as an altitude. The pitch of a Plane can be thought of as the angle at which it comes into contact with a particular cone. This pitch affects the length of the decay of the experience. Similarly, the altitude of a plane can be seen as



1.4 Sonnabend's Groups—a system of classification of planes of experience based upon altitude.

the elevation of the plane in relation to a particular cone. The altitude of the plane affects the apparent intensity (or brightness) of the experience in question.

Sonnabend devised a system of classification of experience based on the division of the planes into four groups (1.4), depending on the pitch or attitude of the plane:

- Group 1- within 7 degrees of arc of vertical
- Group 2 - between 8 degrees and 90 degrees of arc
- Group 3 - between 91 degrees and 173 degrees of arc
- Group 4 - between 174 and 180 degrees of arc

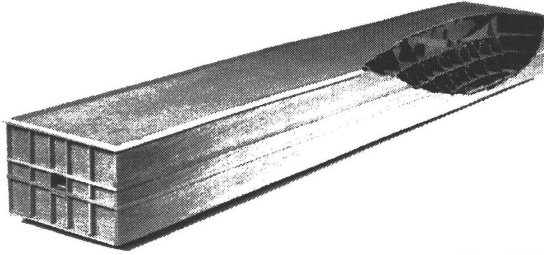
Beyond 180 degrees a plane reverts back to a Group 1 plane (but changes to Class II which will be discussed later).

Clearly, a Group 1 Experience Plane with a vertical or nearly vertical experience pitch passes through the cone (and, accordingly, from memory) far more rapidly than a Group 2 plane with, for example, a 53-degree experience pitch.

A normal individual under normal circumstances is primarily aware of Group 1 and Group 2 planes with the great predominance being Group 2. According to Sonnabend, however, there is absolutely nothing to indicate that the population of planes is not evenly dispersed among the groups and classes—which is to say that for every Group 2 plane there exists a Group 3 plane and for every Group 1 plane there exists a Group 4 plane as well. The great majority of Volume Three of *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter* is devoted to the discussion of Group 3 and 4 planes as well as the whole world of Class II, or Negative Experience Pitch Planes, in which the Perverse Experience Boundary in fact leads the Obverse.

The Group 3 & 4 planes, in conjunction with the Class II planes, make up, according to Sonnabend, a full three-quarters of the experience of everyday life. Yet, because of the nature of the construction of these experiences, we are, by and large, unaware of even their existence. When we are aware of these experiences they appear to us as fleeting or insubstantial and we ascribe to them such names as premonition, *de jà vu* and forebodings. It is precisely this area of Sonnabend's work that has, on the one hand, caused such controversy while, on the other, provided a structure and a vocabulary with which to discuss these often-difficult experiences. For example, let us consider the case of a Class I, Group 3 plane. In this case, the Obverse Experience Boundary is still the leading edge of the plane, however, its first point of contact with the Characteristic Cone is not the Atomic Disc, as is the case with *normal* Group 1 and 2 experiences but, the Obverse Experience Boundary, in fact, first contacts the cone's *hollows*, that part of the cone with which we associate the sensation of memory. Accordingly, this class of experience has a quality of being pre-remembered or foreshadowed.

This discussion has only been able to outline in the broadest of strokes the extraordinarily detailed and far-reaching work of Geoffrey Sonnabend. A more thorough and detailed study of Sonnabend's work offers its student rich rewards as well as many surprises.



THE ARK
Scale, 1 inch: 12.5 cubits

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