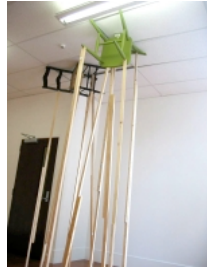


ANTIGRAVITY



Grant Thompson 2008

I'm a fan of *The Ren and Stimpy Show* a cartoon series devised by John Kricfalusi that chronicles the adventures of two inseparable chums, Ren Höek an aggressive ill-tempered chihuahua and Stimpson A. Cat – aka Stimpy – a mild-mannered over-weight moggie. I think my favourite episode is 'Space Madness' (1991), a story within a story from early in the first season that escalates a clutch of Star Trekish moments into absurdity.

'Space Madness' casts Ren and Stimpy in dual roles as the audience for and the lead characters in Stimpy's favourite live-action drama, *Commander Höek and Cadet Stimpy*. Our episode of *The Ren and Stimpy Show* begins with Ren and Stimpy in front of their television preparing to watch an episode of *Commander Höek and Cadet Stimpy*. Stimpy explains that you can't watch the show without your trusty Commander Höek Radar Decoder Ring, your official Commander Höek Space Helmet, your genuine Super-Elastic Time Shorts – all of which Stimpy proudly wears – and, most importantly, your Anti-Gravity Bubble Gum! Stimpy unrolls his ulcerated tongue from his putrid mouth to reveal a well-chewed lump of the said Anti-Gravity Bubble Gum. In the instant the bubble gum makes contact with air, it rises dragging Stimpy tongue-first toward the ceiling. Contact with the ceiling prevents the Anti-Gravity Bubble Gum rising further, which leaves Stimpy freed from gravity's attraction, but fixed in the time and space of antigravity, an apparently equal and opposite force.

The antigravity theme continues on Ren and Stimpy's television screen. Commander Höek has succumbed to the dreaded 'space madness' and Cadet Stimpy, hoping to calm his commanding officer's frayed nerves, has run him a hot bath. Commander Höek sinks into the steaming water, farts and smiles (It's that kind of show). Cadet Stimpy, hoping to enhance the relaxing atmosphere turns off the gravity by pressing a small blue button set in one of the bathroom walls. Turning off the gravity causes the bath water along with the increasingly delirious Commander Höek to rise as one from the bathtub and drift through the space-rocket's generous cabins at a

height somewhere between ceiling and floor. Oddly, the loss of gravity only affects the bathwater, Commander Höek and the bar of soap he eats while drifting, believing it to be his beloved chocolate-coated ice cream bar. It seems that existence outside the fixity of space and time in a world freed from the constraints of gravity is a delusion, the fantasy of a space-rocket commander confused by the delirium of space madness.

Ren and Stimpy are cartoon characters and therefore not the most reliable of sources for a discussion of scientific method however; the show's representation of antigravity mechanisms as absurd delusions is not very distant from some historical investigations into the subject. For example, Thomas Edison believed that an antigravity agent existed somewhere in nature and, after noticing that some birds have an insufficient wingspan to fly unaided, speculated that a chemical in their skin enabled them to stay in the air. Roger Babson, one of Edison's greatest disciples tested the observation by collecting and examining birds of all kinds, eventually amassing some 5,000 specimens. Babson's research led to his establishing the Thomas A. Edison Bird Museum, an extension of his Gravity Research Centre, it did not however produce the hypothesised avian antigravity chemical. (Lanza, 1990: 89-90)

Edison's belief in an antigravity mechanism was dependent on Newton's Law of Gravitation that imagined gravity as a force between two objects, causing attraction in relation to the two objects' mass. Under such circumstances, ordinary matter repels an object with negative mass thereby creating the possibility of an antigravity effect. Given Newton's understanding of gravity as a force, it is also conceivable that the universe contains some material that could shield against or disrupt gravitational force thereby also producing an antigravity effect.

Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, published in 1915, displaced Newton's model with an entirely different mechanism. Gravity for Einstein was not a force but an effect of the local slope of the universe in the direction of time. Chairs, in Einstein's curved space, usually remain floor-bound not because the force of gravity holds them there, but because the floor is the shortest distance between today and tomorrow. Gravity, within Einstein's model, is purely attractive since the universe contains only matter with positive mass, therefore, a search for objects of negative mass becomes foolish and the possibility of an antigravity mechanism illusory. Under extreme circumstances, inside a black hole for example, the model of gravity proposed by Einstein's theory breaks down. Most physicists believe that under certain conditions, the four fundamental interactions (strong nuclear force, electromagnetic force, weak nuclear force and gravity) will

unify, allowing gravity to function in ways science is yet to imagine, perhaps even generating something we might recognise as antigravity.

Speculation concerning the possibilities a unified field might allow has generated considerable activity amongst those operating along paradigms that intersect rather than align with those of official science. *Anti-Gravity and the Unified Field* (Childress, 1990) is a collection of articles typical of those generated by an on-line search using the keyword antigravity. The book's content includes discussion of: how gravity, electricity and magnetism manifest from a unified field around us; why artificial gravity is possible; the secrets of UFO propulsion; gravitational pulse spacecraft and the wave theory of gravitation; flying saucers as superconducting whirls of plasma; suppressed technology and government cover-ups; and the linking via the world grid of alternative communities by airships.

The first piece in the collection, 'Albert Einstein and the Unified Field' (Childress; 9-34) provides a discussion of Einstein's Unified Field Theory that draws on James Maxwell's Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism (1860) and the work of T.J.J. See who, in the 1930s published a substantial body of research dealing with his wave theory of gravitation. The essay goes on to suggest a universe constructed of multiple and hierarchical planes organised on perhaps as many as eleven levels. The seventh plane in this system is the Plane of Existence, the 'Seventh Heaven' of Biblical lore and the plane that manifests love, in the sense of divine love, as the actual energy that fuels the universe; love however, will elude all attempts at integration into scientific understanding. Despite love's evasions, the author concludes that gravity control is within easy reach and probably already realised (in secret) by the scientific community.

I am not drawing attention to the ideas brought together in Childress's book to then subject them to ridicule. I like the way that some of the authors mash up what they call 'lost technology' with space travel and science, but their insistence on producing information rather than questions forces them to reproduce what is known and understood. This tendency is particularly apparent in the diagrams and drawings running through each article. A large number of these contributions attempt to explain the operation of various propulsion systems in UFOs. These, while technical in appearance contain no verifiable or useful information; they seem the work of enthusiasts attempting to substantiate imagined realities. Other diagrams, particularly those representing the unified field and its various energy flows seem to owe more to mystical systems of thought than to any scientific method; they seem interested in representing an intuited knowledge rather than

an observed experience, which lends these works greater openness than their technical counterparts demonstrate.

Einstein's theory of a unified field published in 1929, did not attempt to produce outcomes. For those with the capacity for abstract geometrical thinking the theory revealed that the general laws for a unified field were derivable from a certain hypothesis regarding four-dimensional space. Further, the theory showed that these laws included the known laws of the electromagnetic field as well as Einstein's law of gravitation as special cases. The theory provided a way of thinking about the universe that allowed ideas previously considered impossible. It created a space for new thought. Ren and Stimpy bounce all over that space, eventually discovering the History Eraser Button and pushing it. The cosmic engineers of the Internet seem intent on colonising any unified field that might exist through the establishment of outposts from the future, but minus the fleshiness of William Burroughs's visions. Paul Cullen's *Antigravity* works attempt to represent an antigravity effect as a means to get us thinking about how we live with things.

The works read as three-dimensional sketches in space. Each, a mundane piece of painted, wooden, furniture held hard against the ceiling, the chairs awkwardly, by multiple props. Each prop is a line of lapped and bolted lengths of lightweight timber. One prop has come up a little short and a book provides the difference. There is a strong sense of someone making the work, trying to figure out the construction while thinking about antigravity. Each construction is an expression of thinking, but none deliver a final form or produce a solution, they offer no information about antigravity. Cullen describes the constructions in the *Antigravity* project as diagrams – explanatory devices that take formation rather than form as their locus of operation. A diagram describes a provisional position since further diagrams will generate new understandings and consequently new models. Diagrams do not repeat moments but always transform them into something new, they therefore constantly shift internally, constructing a broken sequence of interactions across time, between some perceivable concept and the set of forces that organise it.

In the particular situation of Cullen's antigravity works, the set of organising forces is named Paul Cullen: it includes the exchanges that brought Cullen to the moment he works in; the exchanges that produced the tools, materials and methods he works with; the exchanges that generated the space his work occupied; and the exchanges that construct the culture generating those tools, materials, methods and spaces, which is also the culture inventing antigravity, the idea Cullen's project takes as its subject.

Antigravity turns thinking on its head, but in the end, perhaps antigravity is simply the project's structure, something to encourage thought by making the familiar, unfamiliar. Antonin Artaud writes,

I have always been struck by the mind's obstinacy in wanting to think in terms of measurement or areas, in fastening on arbitrary states of things so as to think. Thinking in segments, in crystalloids, so that each form of existence remains fixed in the beginning and thought does not communicate with objects instantaneously and uninterrupted. But this fixation, this immobilisation, this sort of monumentalisation of the soul OCCURS BEFORE THOUGHT, so to speak. Obviously these are the right conditions for creativity. (Artaud, 1968: 69. Author's emphasis.)

It seems to me that Cullen accepts Artaud's identification of the human mind's need to grab hold of 'arbitrary states of things to think,' but then attempts to disrupt that tendency's inclination toward atrophy by providing the mind with an unstable connection, something with which thought might communicate directly and in an embodied kind of way. If I were to decide to sit on a floor bound chair my nervous system would instruct the flexor muscles to pull the upper part of my trunk forward and to initiate bending at the hips, knees and ankles. A bare moment later gravity would take over and pull me toward the sitting position. At the same time, the nervous system would direct the extensor muscles to counteract gravity thereby preventing me from falling in a heap. Finally, once I was secure in the chair, the nervous system would allow the extensor muscles and my body as a whole to relax. (Coulter, 2001: 22) All this happens without conscious thought, but attach the chair to the ceiling and ask me to perform the now illogical act of sitting down and perhaps contact with day to day reality will dissolve allowing new forms of contact to appear, "contacts reduced to a thread which catches fire but never breaks." (Artaud, 1968: 70)

Inventing a system that secures furniture to the ceiling of an art gallery is likely to generate curiosity in those who view the work, principally curiosity about the why since in this case the how, in all its makeshift glory, is obvious. Curiosity leads to asking questions about a thing and leads us to seek out information that will explain the thing that has raised our curiosity. Prolonging the questions delays the moment in which the artwork yields to interpretation and becomes something understood. Cullen attempts to promote a position of curiosity toward his work by applying the irrational logic of antigravity to the gallery and inventing a supporting

system for the work that causes it to intrude on our viewing space. The multiple props supporting each work claim an area through the full height of the gallery as belonging to that work. These claims, often inconveniently drawn across thoroughfares, complicate our navigation of a gallery space and cause us to question the familiar relations between artworks, the gallery and a viewer. Paul Cullen's *Antigravity* works raise questions concerning the fixity of space/time relations. They also make us curious about the ways humans and things might move through space.

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