BETSY: You know what you remind me of?  
TRAVIS: What?  
BETSY: That song. By Kris Kristofferson.  
TRAVIS: Who’s that?  
BETSY: The songwriter. “He’s a prophet—He’s a prophet and a pusher. Partly truth, partly fiction. A walking contradiction.”

—*Taxi Driver* (1976)
212 stranger than fiction
David Lynch, Eraserhead
Dan Clowes, Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron
I vividly remember the first time I saw Twin Peaks. It was December 12, 1990. I was an eighth-grader growing up in the rural Cascade Mountain town of Enumclaw, Washington. That night I was babysitting for our local librarian, Bob Baer. While under no circumstance would I have been allowed to watch Twin Peaks at home, I was free to be lured into the series at the Baer residence with my parents miles away and the kids asleep upstairs. Twin Peaks was a revelation. Not only did it connect with me geographically, but creatively as well. Even the nonsense made sense to me somehow. And that fascinated me. How could Lynch communicate so effectively, while being so…strange?

At that age storytelling had already become an obsession of mine. I began writing and illustrating comic books in the fourth grade, and by the eighth grade it consumed all the free time I had. At first I was aping the style of the Marvel comics I loved, using the Stan Lee model of taking normal, flawed people and endowing them with superhuman powers. I was interested in creating narratives and places that were fictional yet believable, and after seeing Twin Peaks I realized the potential of taking that model even further, and never saw storytelling the same again.

As I grew older I began creating comics with more complex assemblages of interest and influence. My latest series, Runoff, is an homage to Enumclaw made from a surreal pastiche of elements: film noir, B-Horror, Bloom County, and Twin Peaks. While creating Runoff, I came to realize the same point Lovecraft makes in the beginning quote: you want to create something that revolts against reality? Something memorable? Something surprising? Then start with something that is compatible with reality. Our reality: a place depicted by naturalistic description and governed by common sense. And from there transform it within that reality. And then there is a good chance you will have created something that is at first approachable, then curious, then fascinating…and then maybe even transcendent…surreal…uncanny.

I adhere to this way of working both as a comic book creator and graphic designer: a way that creates work that roots itself in reality in order to subvert it. What is “real” is what is experienced communally, and if my work can connect with that, then it will help
Striving to tap into what is collective has been a goal for a variety of artists, and that has generated a variety of tactics to achieve that goal. On one end of the spectrum we find Kasimir Malevich, the father of the art movement Suprematism that flourished around 1915 in Soviet Russia. By rejecting the depiction of anything naturalistic or cultural, Malevich painted abstract geometric compositions that strove to create shapes and spaces only possible in the imagination of humanity. Malevich stripped historical baggage and invited a new beginning for painting through the erasure of representation. This tactic appealed to many creators, fully blossoming in the Modernist movement, where creators of all types—from painters to architects—imagined a world free of ornament and history, a world bound by reason instead of reference, and therefore tapping into a timeless collective imagination?

At the other end of this spectrum we find David Lynch, who evokes the communal through genre and cultural references. I find this tactic to be more effective because Lynch embraces and uses reality in order to transcend it. He takes our cultures, our genres, and subverts them, redirects them. In this way, Lynch’s tactics fit the Lovecraftian model of creating supplements to “the visible and measurable universe” rather than contradictions.

Lynch’s redirection of expectation and genre has an American accent, since American culture is often typified as a sampling and appropriation of other cultures. Here we still find the pioneer spirit, one that creates with a bold lawlessness, an “anything goes” mentality. This spirit invites us to look at our world, our cultures, as fertile sources for reference and inspiration.

The transformative qualities I find affinity with in the work of Lovecraft and Lynch are part of a tradition in American art and culture, one which I would describe as a loose hybrid of odd references from horror fiction, fine art, and Americana; a kind of Gothic American Surrealism.

What’s this tradition about? It’s about unveiling the gothic in the everyday. It’s about emphasizing the grotesque and mysterious qualities of something we could find on our own block. It’s about knowing that the most powerful things can also be the most communal. It’s about borrowing from the most familiar genres and icons to reveal the deeply ingrained and disturbing power of things that we might usually find comfort in. It’s about the use of narrative and archetypical characters, and being innovative with the use of both.
Like a creature without a fixed form, the tradition of Gothic American Surrealism can be found in a variety of art. It can be found in the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Patricia Highsmith, Stephen King, and Cormac McCarthy. It can be found in the photographs of Diane Arbus, O. Winston Link, and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. The music of Brian Wilson, DEVO, Warren Zevon, and DJ Shadow. The films of Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Tim Burton, and the Coen Brothers. The comics of Winsor McCay, Jack Kirby, Berke Breathed, and Dan Clowes. The art of Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, Paul McCarthy, Eric White, and John Currin.

This tradition not only manifests itself across a variety of media, it also has a tradition of inspiring and cross-referencing itself among those media. With its high contrast and open composition, Edward Hopper’s 1925 painting *House by the Railroad* invites me to imagine exactly why I wouldn’t want to knock on that door. Alfred Hitchcock seemed intrigued to knock, and gave us the Bates Motel and Psycho in 1960. Diane Arbus’ *Identical Twins, Roselle NJ, 1967* was twinned itself in 1980 when we laid eyes on the twin girls haunting the halls of the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, which is itself based on the novel of another practitioner of Gothic American Surrealism: Stephen King. The mundane yet ominous landscape and lighting of David Lynch’s 1977 film *Eraserhead* was a clear influence on Dan Clowes’ early ’90s surreal comic book masterpiece *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*. And a phrase uttered by The Giant in Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* is sampled to close DJ Shadow’s groundbreaking 1996 album *Endtroducing*. This sample Shadow chose is quite fitting for the tradition. “It is happening again” the Giant says...“It is happening again.”

Gothic American Surrealism also knows the power of reviving and re-appropriating things of the past. The tradition embraces hauntology, an idea first introduced by Jacques Derrida’s in his 1994 work *Specters of Marx*. The Wikipedia entry for hauntology explains the idea quite well:

The word, a portmanteau of haunt and ology and homophone to ontology in Derrida’s native French, deals with “the paradoxical state of the spectre, which is neither being nor non-being”, according to a professor at RMIT University. The idea suggests that the present exists only with respect to the past, and that society after the end of history will begin to orient itself towards ideas and aesthetics that are thought of as rustic, bizarre or “old-timey;” that is, towards the “ghost” of the past. In this, it is has
some similarity with the cyberpunk literary movement.

Hauntology is proving to be quite relevant for today, with the use of sampling permeating all forms of contemporary art. Currently the idea finds its biggest supporter in the critic Simon Reynolds, who, in his 2006 essay *Hauntology Now*, states:

> Why hauntology now? Well, has there ever been a time when finding gaps in the seamless surfaces of ‘reality’ been more pressing? Excessive presence leaves no traces. Hauntology’s absent present, meanwhile, is *nothing but traces*.

Graphic design is almost by definition a practice based around the collection and re-presentation of things. And the flexibility of Gothic American Surrealism across a variety of media makes its translation into a formal graphic language for a designer like myself quite appealing.

Graphic design is a protean profession, one that morphs through various forms and media to express content. In Beatrice Warde’s classic 1955 essay *The Crystal Goblet*, she argues that a true typographer strives to become invisible in the presentation of content, just as wine is best experienced in a clear crystal goblet. Warde believes a typographer should only make decisions that best present the color, character, and flavor of the subject at hand. In a sense I agree with Warde, for I often look at a design problem by investigating and imagining where the text or character is inherent to it. Then I begin to transform it. And while I am not a designer who adheres to a single *formal* agenda, I *am* a designer who adheres to a set of *tactical* agendas. These tactical agendas strive to recharge context by adding something engaging, something surprising. And it is through these tactical agendas that a body of design work emerges that may have variety, but shares a signature core all my own. And these tactics I adhere to are the use of redirection, genre, and the truth.

A well-executed redirection is a powerful tactic for designers, and I feel I use it often because of my background as a comic book illustrator and writer. In that profession, both pacing and the right twist at the right moment is everything.

Redirection is required for almost any engaging constructed experience. Imagine a movie about a man who gets up in the morning, experiences a predictable day, and then goes to bed. Roll credits. That wouldn’t cut it. As an audience, we expect a deviation from the expected to happen at some point—though it is the power and placement of that deviation that can make it, or break it.

Scary stories are short masterpieces at this. A babysitter starts getting scary phone calls. The calls keep coming. Calls promising to kill the babysitter and the kids. Finally, the babysitter asks the operator to trace the last call. And the operator states in bewilderment “the call...is coming from *inside your house!*” Everyone knows that one. A quick, effective redirection sticks with us. It enters our collective discourse.

An example of using redirection effectively in my work is a motion graphics biography I did about my classmate Daniel Harding. It begins with a white background, with Dan placed in the lower left of the screen. Text scrolls quickly from the bottom, to come to rest at the upper right of the screen. “This is Daniel Harding,” it reads. Dan reads the text, and begins to disagree with the statement. “Eh,” he says, “actually, um...” but before he can finish, the text rewrites itself to read “This is Daniel Joseph Harding.” Dan reads the edit and says “Okay.”

Redirection one: Dan can somehow disagree with the text, and it immediately corrects itself without Dan having to be specific on what is wrong with it.

The text then scrolls off screen, and is replaced by a new statement, which reads “He is your typical mild-mannered gentleman from a suburban London town.” Dan sees the new text and says “Oh, I also lived in... ehm...” and the text immediately changes to add “and Saudi Arabia.” Dan reads the edit and says “Okay.”

Redirection two: Dan’s past is a bit more exotic than you may have originally thought.

A few more of these interactions happen between Dan and the text, forming a pace and tone. The viewer expects text to scroll up from the bottom, expects Dan to disagree with it, and expects the text to rearrange itself to better reflect the character of Dan. It is quiet and cordial. Then a line of text scrolls up which states “He likes bands like Sonic Youth and Pavement.” Nothing strange here, the sort of smart art-rock bands liked by many designers. Dan nods, suddenly perks up, saying “Oh! And Megadeth.”

Megadeth’s *99 Ways to Die* comes thundering in with a heavy metal assault. Images of Megadeth’s skeleton mascot Vic Rattlehead leap up one at a time to the pounding
beat. And Dan sits and stares at us, lost in the sudden saturation of image. The white, flat world of typography and interaction we experienced before has been replaced by a surreal space populated by heavy metal monsters, nearly obliterating the small Englishman in the corner.

Redirection three: the environment, both sonically and visually, has been totally overturned. And if it wasn’t apparent before, it is apparent now that the text and images are being projected onto Dan instead of some post-production trick. This sudden assault is only effective because of the previous time spent creating a quiet, predictable environment. The bio piece is a set of small redirections followed by a major one. And it’s all done in thirty seconds.

Another tactic is the use of genre. Talk about getting bang for your buck: genres come prepackaged with associations and expectations that can be played upon to amplify your subject at hand. Reality is often characterized through the communal language of genre—“it was like a horror movie”—since genres are often reality in a highly concentrated form. In this way genres are like potent flavors: using combinations and dashes of them together will create something more engaging and surprising than sticking with the overwhelming flavor of just one.

After being assigned to make a public service announcement of our choice, I decided to create a motion graphics piece that addressed a fictional social problem: the chronic misuse of a powerful magic hand sign called Nebiros. The narrator of the piece informs us that although using Nebiros is quite effective, it “Weakens transdimensional steady states making our plane susceptible to Roanoke Island Phenomenon.” He then goes on to present us with a set of scenarios, asking whether they would be appropriate for Nebiros usage: “Would it be proper to use it to alter a 10-level hypercube?” (YES!) “What about to find your TV remote?” (NO!) “What about to banish a level seven demon?” (NO!) “How about to complete your taxes?” (YES!)

Using Nebiros began by citing names and warnings found in books on the occult, especially those addressing the practices of occultists such as Aleister Crowley. But I wrote the copy to be reminiscent of educational films from the 1950s. And the visual elements were based not on the dark, druidic style associated with the occult, but instead on Japanese cartoon commercials. The genre of Japanese commercials, which often
includes a cute cartoon narrator, locks in well with the genre of American educational films, which often used the same narrative trope. And so, in this bright and poppy land filled with pinks and cyans, your narrator comes in the form of a cute floating cartoon head that looks like a mustached robot wearing a turban, and speaks in a raspy, upper-class British accent.

In the end Using Nebiros is a mixture of at least three genres: a 1950s American educational video discussing the occult power of the hand symbol Nebiros in the visual landscape of Japanese product commercials. This strange mixture is a good example of my design process: I took my idea and homed in on the moods, elements, and genres that would provide the best surprises, combinations, and solutions to make that idea even more engaging.

Using contradictory genres together has been a favorite tactic of mine in both my design and comic book work. The question of which genre a project should evoke, or which ones it should contrast within itself, is one I approach at the beginning of each project. This is a tactic used by others working in the tradition of Gothic American Surrealism. Stanley Kubrick has always been an inspiration for me in this regard, especially his decisions in the making of the 1964 film Dr. Strangelove. The book that it is based on, Red Alert by Peter George, is a straightforward, Tom Clancy-esque thriller, and Kubrick found it difficult to adapt successfully. That is, until he decided to make this chilling tale about a nuclear apocalypse into a comedy. And one hell of a comedy at that—it is now hailed by many critics as the best in cinema history. What makes Dr. Strangelove so effective is the powerful contrast between the subject matter and the genre through which it is delivered.

But my most used, most signature tactic is to take what I find most fascinating about our reality, about what is true, and allow that truth to be presented in a way that baffles. Knowing when to leave the truth as just that is a very powerful tactic for a designer, because truth is stranger than fiction. Many of my projects present aspects of our world unaltered, and they often prove to be the most engaging pieces.

I recounted the 1971 meeting between Elvis Presley and then President Richard Nixon in a sixteen-page book using only documents and photos from that event. In the process of making it, my initial impulse was to begin overlapping and affecting the images. Karel Martens was visiting Yale at
The text and photos are real and unedited, though the way they interact leads to a sense of disbelief that our government is really operating in such a way.

A final example of using truth to baffle is what I call my Duncan book. The book is about the Duncan Hotel in New Haven, and is divided into chapters that address different aspects of the hotel. Within each chapter the subject, tone, layout, and paper stock change, creating a cast of characters and subjects bound within the spine of a single book, similar to the strange collection of people and situations found within the hotel on any given night.

The book begins by reprinting customer reviews of the Duncan found online through places like TripAdvisor and Yahoo, which are startling in the sheer horror so many felt while staying there. These reviews are mixed in with photographs I took of the hotel lobby, a strange and creepy place that seems lost in time. The first chapter ends with a text written by John Hinckley on New Year’s Day, 1981. Hinckley, obsessed with the movie Taxi Driver, was a resident of the Duncan hotel while he stalked Jodie Foster. After Hinckley’s New Year’s entry, a new chapter begins, reprinting the poetry of
Spam Collaborations

Hinckley paired with images of White House documents recounting the Reagan assassination attempt. After this chapter on Hinckley, a new one begins consisting of portraits and stories of current residents of the Duncan. The final chapters document the night I checked into the Duncan myself to record my own experiences.

Each chapter, each photo, each piece of text, is true. But the real characters and stories surrounding the Duncan create a surreal and potent atmosphere. And the best part about it is that, when questioned, you can say with full confidence that everything within it is true, that this is reality.

More often than not, my work is generated through a mixture of these three tactics. Two examples of this are among my strongest pieces of design work: The Spam Book, and The Parking Garage Movie.

The Spam Book was the last in a series of pieces I made around the theme of transformation. One day a spam email caught my eye. It was one of those that used computer-generated gibberish to get through my spam filters and into my inbox. The text was vividly poetic and it sparked an idea. I decided I would choose one spam email a day as a piece of copy submitted by a writer wanting to collaborate with me as a comic book illustrator.

In this spam collaboration I decided the subject of the email would serve as the title of the comic strip, the computer generated name of the spam emailer would be the name of the writer, and I would transform the abstract spam text into either a one panel comic strip (such as the Far Side or Family Circus) or four panel comic strip (such as Garfield or Doonesbury). At the top of each comic strip would be the date the text was submitted, and that could serve as a reference for the back portion of the book where the original spam text would be reprinted.

I wanted to execute these collaborations in the style of daily comic strips because it evokes a genre known for its bland simplicity, something that—with only a few exceptions—plays to the lowest-common denominator and rarely challenges its audience. It is a genre with a commonly understood structure, one that is expected by nearly everyone (panel one: the set up, panel two and three: the build, panel four: the joke). So it is the perfect genre to pair with texts so wildly abstract, texts created without any narrative structure in mind. I also utilized the wide variety of sub-genres inherent to the daily comic strip by changing the drawing style for each comic to reflect the character and atmosphere I found in the spam text.
For the Spam Book, the tactical use of the truth was using the text, date, subject and name of the spammer. The tactical use of redirection was to take that spam text and imagine it as a piece of copy submitted for collaboration. The tactical use of genre was to choose the format of a daily comic book strip.

My Parking Garage Movie originated from an assignment asking for two pieces based around a site of our choice. My first piece was a book that dealt with the constants and variables of the parking garage. For the second piece I wanted to do the opposite: a movie that dealt with narrative and atmosphere. I decided on the genre first. I wanted to make a horror movie using only the spaces and sounds of the parking garage. No people. No words. This genre came to mind because of the many times films use an empty parking garage as an ominous place. If you are watching a movie and someone is walking alone to their car in a parking garage...you know something bad is about to happen.

I went into the garage and investigated what elements I could activate and use. The doors to the stairwells. The elevators. The security camera feeds. The mechanized entry gates. I made audio recordings of the space to capture the range of sounds available to me in that space. The sudden eruption of sounds when an elevator arrives. The mechanical hum of the entry gates. The ghostly echo of a car on a higher floor. After exploring what the space could provide, I created an abstract narrative around what I could gather, and then recorded the visuals and sounds that I needed.

Next I mined the recordings to begin constructing the narrative and atmosphere I envisioned. I edited and sequenced the video footage, sometimes manipulating the flow of time. I played with the audio recordings, enhancing and isolating qualities I found within them. Finally I paired the two together. I redirected the true sounds and movement of the space to create a movie that slowly introduces a parking garage seemingly haunted by poltergeists running wild, chasing each other, evoked through the activation of the spaces found within the parking garage.

For the Parking Garage Movie the tactical use of the genre came first by deciding to play off the ominous atmosphere parking garages so often have in cinema. The tactical use of the truth was the decision to have the movements and sounds provided by the garage be the only characters used. And the tactic of redirection came through the editing, sequencing, and manipulation of that footage to get the atmosphere and narrative I had set out to create. And the atmosphere
I wanted was one that I have often striven to create: that of the uncanny.

In the book *Film Art*, the authors David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson discuss various abstract formal systems in cinema. One approach they put forth “is to use real objects and to isolate them from their everyday context in such a way that their abstract qualities come forward.” That is what the Parking Garage movie does: it takes the real qualities inherent to that space, and uses them in a calculated way to transcend reality. As viewers we can’t help but to assign a personality to this lifeless, yet animated parking garage. This fits into Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 definition of the uncanny, in which one “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate.”

Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny was central to Freud’s seminal 1919 essay on the subject. In *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)*, Freud categorizes the phenomenon of the uncanny as belonging not to the realm of the psychological, but to the aesthetic. This is an important distinction, and Freud laments the lack of exploration and writing on the uncanny:

As good as nothing is to be found upon this subject in comprehensive treatises on aesthetics, which in general prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime; that is, with feelings of a positive nature; and with the circumstances and the objects that call them forth, rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress.

Freud goes on to build upon Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny, saying it resides in places where “the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something we hitherto have regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.” Freud states that the experience of the uncanny is to feel as if one is “being robbed of one’s eyes,” and that instances of “repetition of the same thing” evoke the uncanny.

In an example tying together the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes and experiencing repetition, Freud presents a scenario in which “one may wander about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or for an electric switch, and collide time after time with the same piece of furniture.” I took this scenario as inspiration for a short motion piece I made about the Duncan hotel. In this movie you experience a slow pan of the bathroom in a Duncan hotel room, though the pan is uneven in pace and at times jostled. You hear a con-
stant gurgling and hissing from the leaking toilet. And at times the room seems to fold upon itself, covering exits and spaces with walls and doors. After about a minute the pan has circled itself, and you realize you are back at the beginning again, and the loop continues infinitely.

The aesthetic phenomenon of the uncanny is extremely hard to evoke, but has a power to engage and surprise that fascinates me as both a graphic designer and storyteller. It is, like hauntology, an idea that has renewed relevance in the cultural landscape we find ourselves in today. Hauntology and the uncanny have much in common. “Haunt is a perfectly uncanny word,” states Simon Reynolds “since like ‘unheimlich’ it connotes both the familiar-domestic and its unhomely double. Haunt originally meant ‘to provide with a home,’ and has also carried the sense of the ‘habitual.’”

Both the uncanny and hauntology relate to our contemporary experience because we live in a culture based heavily on sampling and constructed realities. A drum break from James Brown’s Funky Drummer has been looped not just for one hip-hop recording, but for literally hundreds. Fred Astaire has returned from the grave to dance with a vacuum cleaner. YouTube videos and parodies are replacing the very media they ape. Second lives and blog personalities are being lived every day, creating a world where nearly anyone with a computer has constructed their own doppelgänger.

In our contemporary world the tradition of Gothic American Surrealism is more effective and relevant than ever, and it is in that position partly because of the problems stemming from the Modernist movement. Although Modernism has many benefits, we as a culture have begun dealing with the side effects over the past few decades. The mechanical, repetitive quality of Modernism can lead to the same uncanny repetitive trauma Freud writes about. Chris Grunberg addresses this quite well in his essay Life in a Dead Circus:

Freud’s trauma coincides with the modernist aversion to colour, based on a zealous streak of Puritanism—a deep-seated suspicion of superfluous decoration and of any signs of sensual-ity paired with mechanistic functional-ism. In the realm of pure concept and interiority, the uncanny has no place, as absolute reason bans the spectre of corporeality. In the cold, bright, empty and functional spaces of modernist architecture it was impossible to dream, and subconscious emotions and deep-seated traumas remained buried by the veneer of rationality.

For better or for worse, Modernism isn’t the way we describe contemporary culture, nor is Postmodernism. Whatever future historians may define our contemporary age to be, it is surely one in which reality is feeding on itself, twisting itself. One in which culture and genre references are being understood by an ever-growing collective as a global culture emerges. One in which truth is stranger than fiction has ever been. As someone who is inspired by, and works within, the tradition of Gothic American Surrealism, I find this an exciting time to create, to generate atmospheres, narratives, and experiences from both this current reality and those that have come before it. To explore, surprise, and redirect expectation. To find and work with what is fascinating about reality, about truth. Because as you know...the truth...say it with me now...

The truth is out there.