

Double, Double

The collaborative work of Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson

Two false dawns? Two burning bushes? Two Trojan Horses? Why two? Doubles, pairs, doppelgangers and twins are curious objects: palpably unique but uncannily matched. Of course, the double is central to Freud's concept of the uncanny (hauntings, repetitions, recurrences, remembering). Doubling is not restricted to these effects, though. Irony, for instance – saying one thing and meaning another – is a form of double speech, of two sentences in one. Perhaps it is a false intuition, but it seems as if the second element, the repetition or whatever it is, is causing all the trouble. Does the second play some profound trick on the first? Is there a logic of 'the two', or does the numerical equivalence of different twos conceal a range of techniques and effects? Maybe there's a case for both – but wouldn't that render the argument inconsistent, incoherent? Consider: contradiction is a form of doubling expressed by logicians as 'both p and not-p'. Two is a danger. In fact, the two is (a) a problem object, and also (b) a problem in the way we account for things. So that's two problems in one. Two is double trouble.

Two Buckingham Palaces would leave us with an excess of at least one. Two eyes is ok, while two mouths is one too many. Two Presidents Bush could go either way. There is no simple, straightforward rule for doubling up: some doubles are redundancies, some doubles complete a set, while other doubles are neither. And those that are neither may well fall into several categories of their own. Let us say, then, in advance of saying anything positive about the logic of the two (if that turns out to be what we are doing), that there is very little, if not nothing, you can say about the two that will apply universally to all instances of things coming in twos. Two horses, Trojan or otherwise, have no substantive connection with two pieces of Endless Cord. None at all. Having two of each does not make them more like each other, or anything like that. Number doesn't do that. Nevertheless, number does not leave things as they are.

Number transforms things. Things that come in numbers are not merely multiplied; they are each affected by the existence of the others. Walter Benjamin was quick to identify some of the key elements of this transformation of things by the processes of mechanical reproduction. The loss of aura is only one element of this transformation. Images that are reproduced in their millions have to be characterised - in contrast to the unique object - according to their modes of address, systems of distribution, relations of production, speed, multiplication of uses, and so on. The contrast is conspicuous in examples of unique works or events that, through the techniques of mechanical and digital reproduction, are converted into their opposite: ubiquitous images. Ubiquity is the other extreme, the maximum number of number that unicity takes no share in. And ubiquity, therefore, which might seem like the dialectical negation of unicity (according to the logic of Benjamin's theory of mechanical reproduction), is merely the melodramatic version of number. In these terms, one is not the first number. Number doesn't begin with the unique, it begins with the first increment after unicity. In this peculiar way of thinking about number (which is susceptible of certain, perhaps fatal, criticisms), the first number is two.

In an age for which standardization and mechanisation have been joined with digital and genetic technologies, ubiquity is mundane. In fact, it would be worth reflecting on how technologies of reproduction have completely renovated the concept of mundanity. Premodern mundanity took its bearings from the repetitions of routine and daily occurrences, whereas mundanity today is integral to the objects, products and images that saturate the everyday. Ubiquity is mundane and mundanity is ubiquitous. But more than that, ubiquity has become the dominant quality of mundanity. So much so, in fact, that ubiquity has become almost the precondition of a thing's public existence. And this is the true value of publicity: it confers public existence by providing access to ubiquity. As such, of course, a publication like this one means that the artworks no longer operate completely within the logic of the two but enter the mundane world of ubiquity. And yet, these artworks that enter ubiquity two-by-two do not fully surrender to ubiquity; they do not give up that odd quality. As doubles, they have no aura to lose in the process of reproduction, no unicity to sacrifice. There is something about the two that ubiquity cannot dissolve and of which unicity knows nothing.

Two burning bushes is one thing; two Big Macs is quite another. One of the reasons for the two different kinds of two involved here, is that two Big Macs is a very tiny proportion of the total number of Big Macs whereas two burning bushes, on the face of it, constitutes a one hundred percent increase in burning bushes. Proportion, though, is not the point. There is something much more serious taking place. And it goes against the prevailing tendency to treat ubiquity not only as mundane but as the measure of all things. In the age of ubiquity you might think that adding one thing would be an addition of utter insignificance. Certainly, one more Big Mac is exactly that: a drop in the ocean. This is because Big Macs already exist in the field of number, and therefore the addition of one more is negligible. One more burning bush, on the contrary, is numerically significant despite not being numerically vast: it is a slight addition that has the consequence of entering the burning bush into the consideration of number.

We are, I think, getting closer to recognising some of the specific qualities of the logic of the two (if that's what it is). It's not rocket science but we can at least say this: small steps can still count as giant leaps even in a world inundated with ubiquitous things. If two is, in some counter-intuitive sense, the first number, then there is a logic of the two regardless of the variety of techniques and effects that actual doublings might deploy. This is not because of their numerical equivalence; it is because, in the two, they become numerical. And in this sense, two is not so much a number, a given quantity, or whatever; it is number itself. And number has its own politics. For Deleuze and Guattari number is an historically specific form of human organisation with qualities that are not present in the primitive social organisation of clan lineages or the territorial organisation of States. There is "always a connection between number and the war machine", they argue. This is not a question of the quantity of soldiers, arms and so on; it is a question, they say, of "organisation or composition". War may or may not require its resources to be stored in great numbers, but it certainly requires the numerical organisation of people and things. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The politics of number must be understood before the 'connection' between number and the war machine can be established as anything more than a coincidence.

Consider two rooms, one containing 50 strangers and the other containing your extended family. If you were asked to report on whether anyone was missing in either room, you would no doubt count the number of strangers but this technique would not work for the room full of your extended family. The best way to tell if anyone is missing from the room containing your extended family is not to count them but some combination, perhaps, of recognition and recollection. To recognise them you would just look around to see if anyone was missing; you could see quite quickly if your mum wasn't in the room, for instance. To recall them you might think of them in some sort of order (my technique would be this: my own nuclear family first, then through the other nuclear families one by one, making sure I've got each aunty and uncle and their children before moving on). I imagine it's possible to look at a room of two hundred people or more and still be able to identify one individual missing without having to count. If I'm right about this, checking whether anyone is missing from your own family is to account for a number of people without recourse to number. Livestock is number; pets are not: there is, perhaps, a case to be made for the connection between number and property. If we want to pursue this we have to avoid the naïve idea that property is organised numerically because you want to count what you've got, to keep accounts of your stock. At best this is a secondary aspect of the connection between property and number. That is to say, in order to count your stock, property must already be organised numerically. Counting livestock is proof that property is numeric, not the basis of the connection. If property is numeric it is more likely because ownership is estranging rather than affective. Deleuze and Guattari give this a slightly different emphasis: "number has always served to gain mastery over matter, to control its variations and movements". I think the category of 'matter' as it appears in that formulation is already a form of property, albeit not necessarily in the fully developed capitalist sense. If so, then number is the structuring principle of property, its *sine qua non*.

If the consideration of missing family members suggests a possible non-numeric relation, the radical link between number and property might indicate that, in globalised capitalism, there will be no escape from the effects of number. In such circumstances, number could appear as a sign of a reprehensible regime or even the root cause of the regime's reprehensibility. Not so in the eyes of Deleuze and Guattari, who state: "Horror for horror, the numerical organisation of people is certainly no crueller than the lineal or State organisations. Treating people like numbers is not necessarily worse than treating them like trees to prune, or geometrical figures to contour and model". But haven't Deleuze and Guattari used number to defend number in that passage? Isn't the phrase 'horror for horror' a numerical comparison? What would a non-numerical assessment of number be like? Or, alternatively, what would number be like if it weren't cruel?

Martin Buber may have formulated something like a humane version of number in his account of ethical intersubjectivity, the I-Thou relation. "The one is the spiritual form of natural detachment", he says, "No man is pure person and no man pure individuality... The word I is the true shibboleth of mankind". So, for Buber, though for his own reasons, one is not the first number (of humankind). One is, it seems, a false first number. An abstraction. And for Buber, the beginning of thinking around and against this false, abstract individual is to start with the two, the I-Thou relation. On reflection, it is only on condition that the Thou is another I (to the Thou) and the I is another Thou (to the Thou) that either is possible.

The reversibility of the I-Thou relation is its precondition and entails both that (a) the two precedes the one and (b) each one is doubled by the other. So, each is both and each one is already multiplied by two because of the other. The one is impossible without its multiplication (by two) through the other. The primacy of the two, therefore, is not simply due to the fact that we are considering two individuals instead of one. No, the one exists only within an economy, a logic, of the two. Even with millions or billions of individuals, the economy of the I-Thou remains an economy of the two. Every I is also a Thou and every Thou is also an I; and therefore neither is one (I or Thou) without being both (I and Thou). The ethics of the two, as articulated by Buber in the I-Thou relation, is based on an otherness that dispenses with the one-sidedness of exoticism and the coldness of instrumental relations. The other-as-Thou is the other as subject not object. At the same time, of course, this implies that the one, the I, is a subject that is constituted in relation to the other. It is, in effect, an ethics of the decentred subject. And this is because the irreducible alterity of the other is taken as the basis for care. Therefore, the I's reluctance to force the Thou to conform to her own norms is a measure of her ethical bearing. Intersubjectively, to act in accordance with the two rather than the one is if not exactly the guarantee of ethics, then at least its first condition. And so, if two is the number of number and thereby colludes in the social organisation of the war machine, property and cruelty, the two is also, it seems, the base number of ethical address. Is there, then, two twos?

Hegel said history repeats itself and Marx said it again. In fact, Hegel's argument about historical repetition is known mostly through Marx's repetition of it. For most of us, then, it is the second iteration of the statement about history repeating itself that comes first. Readers of Freud and Derrida would not be surprised by the logic. Freud's concept of deferred action and Derrida's concept of iterability each, in their different way, double the object by locating it within a structure of anticipations and after effects. Repetition and iteration are not strings of discrete events; they are inseparable, like the two of number and the two of ethics. In all these instances the two is the basic unit within which it is possible to identify the one, as a fraction of the two. So, it is not just history that repeats itself. We might even go so far as to say that everything repeats itself. In art, the repetition of everything is customarily repressed and denied with unique objects, original works, private views, one-person shows, signed prints, and so on and so forth. Two domestic picture lights hanging on and lighting up an external brick wall in an industrial Manchester backstreet is a little act of repetition in art. A monumental, historical act of repetition might involve dozens or hundreds of lights, but this is not that sort of repetition. Why two, then? In one sense, the fact that there are two of them is puzzling but, for exactly the same reason, two is enough. Two places each in a new relation, despite the fact that these lights have been plucked out of the ubiquity of retail. This is not the only kind of two in the works of Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson.

Two first edition copies of "How to Win Friends and Influence People" may each have a certain rarity and collectible value – supplies are not unlimited and yet, equally importantly, they were never unique – which is to say that they have a numerical value: two is the base number of their numerical value. Two Dutch Masters, a true diptych consisting of two photos of the artists photographed by each other lit by a cigarette lighter sat next to each other in a car, is doubled not simply because there were two of them there (single photos can handle numbers far greater than that); it is doubled because they pointed the camera

at each other. These two are not structured according to the social organisation of the war machine's organisation and composition of matter, or the number of property. By handing the camera over they have, amongst other things, produced an image (necessarily doubled) of I-Thou reciprocity. Possibly, these two portraits are twinned in other ways, too: two is the first number of the number of consumers and it is also the first number of the artist no longer denying the repetitions of iteration, artistic community and history. So be it. We're not engaged in numerology here, hoping to find a fixed meaning to read off from the number. I've not been trying to convince anyone that the two has a secret meaning, but I've certainly convinced myself that the two is a threshold. What lies beyond is not to be decided beforehand. What's needed are more small steps and giant leaps.

Dave Beech

Published in the exhibition catalogue for 'Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson',
Manchester City Galleries, 2003.