

Desire in Perception and Language

John Shannon Hendrix

Desire for Lacan, as it is manifest in the mechanisms of language, is the attempt to attain or understand that which is missing from the being of the subject, which is the *objet a*. The *objet a* is that around which desire circulates, that upon which fantasy is constructed, and that which is the product of *méconnaissance*. It is that which is excluded by signification in language, that of which the subject is deprived as it is solidified into a signifier in language. The elided subject in signification, and the divided subject in language, are the result of that which the subject can no longer be in rational discourse. The *objet a* is present in “the existence of everything that the ego neglects, scotomizes, misconstrues in the sensations that make it react to reality, everything that it ignores, exhausts, and binds in the significations that it receives from language,” as Lacan describes in “Aggressivity and Psychoanalysis” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 22).¹

The desire of the Other of Lacan, the desire of the subject in language, is transferred to the desire of the other, the other person or object, the object of desire. The other is objectified by the subject to compensate for its lack, the *objet a*. The *objet a* is the residue of the dialectic between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the conflict between the identity of the subject as it is defined by its Imaginary ego in object identification and the identity of the subject as it is defined by the Symbolic, in its insertion into the Other, the matrix of language and relationships, and the demands that the Other makes of the subject in relation to its phenomenal and Imaginary experience. The demands of the Symbolic are manifest in the unconscious as the discourse of the Other, to which the subject does not have access in itself, but which constitute the unknowable foundation of the conscious activities and thoughts of the subject. As the subject enters into the Symbolic, into the signifying chain of language, the psyche of the subject is fragmented, and the experience of the body is divided in the gestalt ego identification resulting from the mirror stage; the *objet a* is that experience of the unified body of the subject which is rendered impossible by language.

The principal categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the structuring of the psyche are the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary refers to perceived or imagined images in conscious and unconscious thought. The Symbolic refers to the signifying order, signifiers, in language, which determine the subject. The construction of the perceived image, in conscious and unconscious thought, and the role that the image plays in both language and reason, is the subject of both architectural design and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The language of architectural composition is a meta-language in relation to language itself, and shares its basic structure. Like the spoken or written language, the language of architecture combines the image with its organization and insertion into a syntax. The images which are perceived in architecture are always given to the subject in perception in a Symbolic matrix, which might be seen as the Other of Lacan, the matrix of language and laws into which the subject is inserted, which is unperceived by the subject.

According to Lacan in the essay “The Mirror Stage,” “the *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal dynamic shifts from insufficiency to anticipation—a drama that, for its subject, caught in the

mirage of spatial identification, vehiculates a whole series of fantasies which range from a fragmented image of the body to what we will term an orthopedic form of its unity, and to that ultimate assumption of the armature of an alienating identity, whose rigid structure will mark the subject's entire mental development."² The specular image of the infant is in contrast to prior sense-experience already, before it is conceptualized in the Symbolic, which constitutes an organic discord in the infant as well as an inorganic one. The form of the body is fixed in the mirror by the infant "in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him," movements which are precluded by the structure of language. The movements are constituted by phantoms, phantasms, hallucinations, dreams—the products of mental mechanisms in perception, language, memory and imagination. The organic discord in the infant is a sign of an "organic insufficiency in his natural reality" (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 4), as described by Lacan, as the concept of nature is given in the Symbolic. The relation of the subject to nature is, as a result of the self-consciousness brought about by the specular identification, "altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor un-coordination of the neo-natal months." Many organic forms in nature, nuts for example, or pods or anthers, have seams built into them to allow for a natural dehiscence, or splitting apart. The formation of the subject is profoundly influence by the primordial dehiscence, and its effect is principally seen in the mirror stage, where, "caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body image" is transformed into a "totality that I shall call orthopedic," which assumes the role of the "armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development."

The coexistence of phonetic and visual elements in imagination in the writing of a dream is a coexistence of the Imaginary and Symbolic, and the coexistence of mnemonic residues of visual perception and mnemonic residues of auditory perception, the traces interwoven into the language of the unconscious. The visual residue is the "thing presentation," *Sachvorstellung* or *Dingvorstellung*, and the auditory residue is the "word presentation" or *Wortvorstellung* in the formation of the dream image, which is described by Freud as the transition from the latent content to the visual image of the dream in a "concern for representability" or *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, as described by Lacan in "The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud" (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 160). The coexistence of the *Sachvorstellung* and the *Wortvorstellung* in the *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, in the writing of the dream, is a "double inscription" or *Niederschrift*, which involves condensation and displacement, and which corresponds to the coexistence of conscious and repressed or unconscious images which may occur in the preconscious, in the memory of the dream, and which constitutes the structure of conscious language in the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy in particular.

The images in the dream, the transposition of the mnemonic residues of perception, are the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen* described by Freud, which is not a representative representative (*le représentant représentatif*) according to Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (p. 60),³ but "that which takes place of the representation (*le tenant-lieu de la représentation*)" between perception and consciousness, the gap in which the subject is constituted. The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is located in the "schema of the original mechanisms of alienation in that first signifying coupling that enable us to conceive that the subject appears first in the Other" (p. 218), in the signifying chain, the product of which is the elision, the aphanisis of the subject. The subject

is divided because as soon as it appears in the signifying chain, as represented by a signifier, it disappears, in the same way that the mnemonic residue of perception disappears when it is inserted into the signifying chain of the dream and is replaced by the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*.

The *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is as the binary signifier in the metaphor, which in the process of condensation and displacement produces signification by substituting the name of one thing for something else. In the *glissement*, the gliding of signifiers in language, the signified is transferred from one signifier to another, in a *signifying substitution* in the binary signifier. The idea, the image, and the subject, are produced in the gap between signifiers, at the *point de capiton*, the point of retroactive anticipation of presence in the diachronic sequence of language, which is the intersection of the Imaginary and Symbolic. At the anchoring point, “sense emerges from non-sense” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 158). As the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is the binary signifier in the metaphoric process of condensation and displacement in the formation of the dream, as that which takes the place of the representation, it is the supersession or *Urverdrängung* of the signifier in condensation, between the Imaginary and Symbolic, which creates the point of attraction or *Anziehung*, or the *point de capiton*, through which the unconscious is momentarily revealed as an absence, and which creates repression in the *Unterdrückung* of the signifier, which is the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. It is that which occurs in the gap between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, between perception and consciousness, which is repressed, in the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* which is that which takes the place of the representation, in the *glissement* which occurs in the in-between, the gap in consciousness. (10 minutes)



1. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).
2. Jacques Lacan, “Le Stade du miroir” in *Écrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 97, quoted in Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan” in *The Ideology of Theory*, p. 87.
- ³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).