

Notes on the tower in the alethosphere

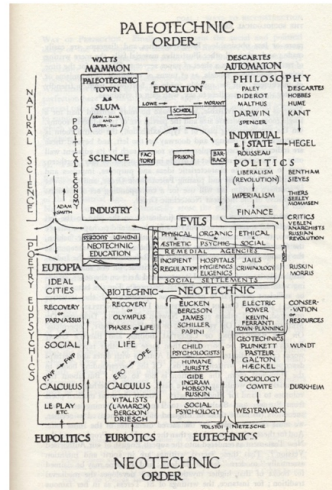


Diagram of Geddes' Outlook Tower exhibition

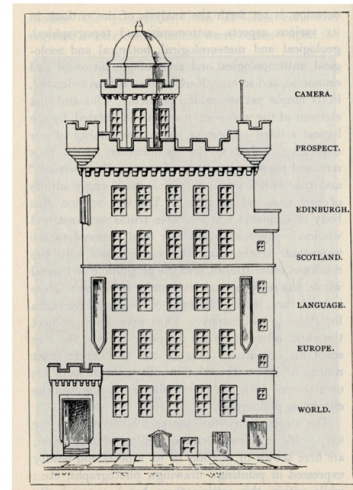


Diagram of Geddes' Outlook Tower, Edinburgh

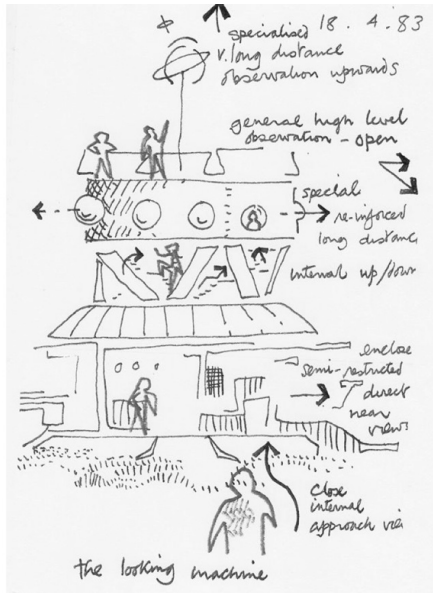
A machine for organising subjects and information into a discourse so that it appears as knowledge about the self appearing retroactively in the built environment.

Lacan introduces the alethosphere in *Seminar XVII*, the seminar which he opens by introducing his thesis on the structure of discourse. He argues that there are four discourses. He subsequently adds a saintly fifth (Lacan *October 40* (1987)), the discourse of the capitalist. This paper will use the discourses to frame a discussion of the alethosphere. It will endeavour to put the alethosphere in relation to Geddes' Outlook Tower. First Geddes, then Lacan, with a tower in between.

Geddes

Geddes regarded the city as a noetic environment. But in order to be noetic, it needs a tower. It goes something like this. The city is a field of information. The subject of the city inhabits the city rather the way a reader inhabits a book. The problem is how to organise the city and its inhabitant in a way that this field of information appears to the subject as knowledge. This is complicated by the fact that it is knowledge about itself – self-knowledge, hence noetic – because it is the environment which the subject builds in order to live well in it. The city is where we inscribe our signifiers upon the surface of the earth. The problem is that they appear strange to us – Geddes uses the word *hieroglyphs*, they are in need of interpretation – we need a form of urban analysis. This is where discourse comes in. Geddes spent his whole life trying and failing to organise readers and cities into a discourse in which information emerges as knowledge. It is a discourse between a subject of the city, the city, and a tower which is a reading machine. The subject is always in motion, what appears as knowledge is always in flux. The temporality is interesting. The knowledge appears retroactively in the walls windows doorways stone walls and field furrows; it was always already there, but it needed the tower for it to appear.

Tower



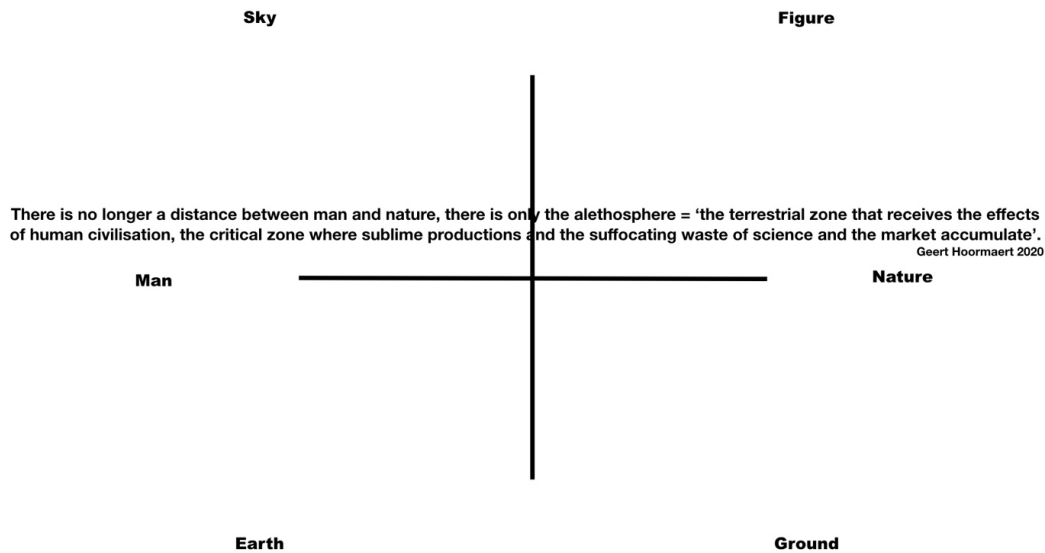
Cedric Price's Looking Machine, from lawn to alethosphere (1983)



the Tower of Babel (Athanasius Kircher, 1679)

We inscribe our signifiers into the surface of the earth – that’s what a city is – but it takes a thinking machine (Geddes’ term) or a looking machine (Cedric Price’s term) or a Tower of Babel (the term in *Genesis*) to read it. Towers are interesting because they span between the signifying surface of the earth (city) and the signifying surface of the sky (alethosphere). They span from furrow to heaven, as it were; and ‘Furrows in the alethosphere’ (the chapter in S17) seems to play on the earthly nature of this ‘sphere that bathes us in its waves.

Lacan



In what appears to be Lacan's only foray into media ecology, he coined the term alethosphere to indicate the place from which our technology speaks to us in surround sound. He coins another term *lathouse* to signify the things that populates the alethosphere.

Sky



Figure



Earth

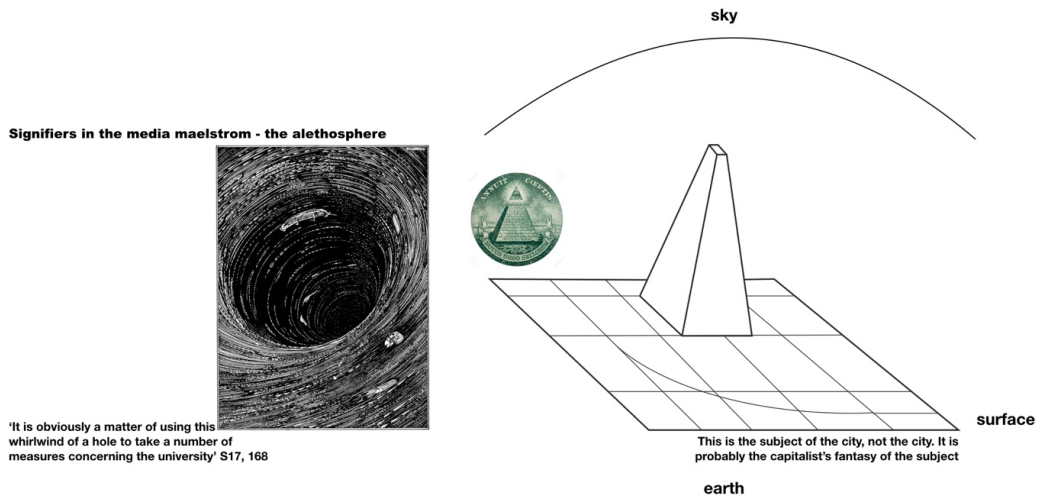


Ground

'The alethosphere gets recorded [I think he means the alethosphere *records*]. If you have a little microphone there, you are plugged into the alethosphere. [Unlike other 'vocal' media, when that medium is the alethosphere, the voice leaves a permanent trace] What is really something is that if you are in a little vehicle that is transporting you toward Mars you can still plug into the alethosphere. And, even, this surprising effect of structure which meant that two or three people have gone wandering around on the moon [dig the faux naivete],... it was certainly not for no reason that they always stayed within the alethosphere. [By definition they stayed within it, because the alethosphere is the orbit of the human subject, the subject brings the alethosphere with it, like Arendt's *wherever you go you will be a polis*]

'These astronauts, as they are called [it follows from above, we are all alethonauts], who had some minor problems... would probably not have overcome them so well... if they had not been accompanied the entire time by this little *a [objet petit a]* that is the human voice. ...The point is that they stayed within the alethosphere.' p161

What Lacan seems to be getting at is that the alethosphere is becoming the new psychical locality, the other scene, the new locus for desire, where our unconscious is, the cloud of the Other. The 'minor problem' is not a spacecraft malfunction (Apollo 13) but the voice that speaks 'nothing but bullshit'. Alethosphere must be understood in terms of Lacan's obsession with Freud's 'Wo es war soll ich werden'. The internet is where our common places are. It has become the primary locus of the voice, the voice of the subject, and the voice of the Other. It is not simply that it is rather more pervasive than other communication technologies, where the voice appears as an object within it; it seems rather to be the media of subjectivity itself. And it has new properties. It is a total environment. It is not between us, like telephone cables; it surrounds us, we are in it like we are in air. In the alethosphere, speech does not disappear into the ether, either; it leaves a permanent trace (cf. Derrida). Speech used to disappear without a trace, a surplus that could not be captured and re-used. It is now cluttering up our space, the more speech the more clutter, because it is in the very place where we are. It is the repository of all our junk.



Although *alethia* means revealed truth, truth in so far as it is revealed to the subject, the truth that reveals the subject to itself, Lacan seems to say in S17 that the alethosphere is *not* the locus of truth [S17,]. Geert Hoormaert's 2020 lecture to the NLS London is one of the best expositions of the alethosphere, his rather negative gloss notwithstanding. The alethosphere is 'neither heaven nor world', it is the 'terrestrial zone that receives the effects of human civilisation, the critical zone where sublime productions and the suffocating waste of science and market accumulate.' He frames his discussion of the alethosphere in terms of climate change and our changed relation nature. There seems to be an equation [science + capitalist market = technology]. Mumford insisted that man was a natural animal, his nature was technological. On a lighter note, the alethosphere is 'neither the world nor an environment', be it 'cosmos, body, or underground', 'it is simply the zone within reach of human activity', 'the zone where culture runs through nature'; the negative gloss is that culture running through nature has created a climate crisis that is evident today in a way that it was not for Lacan in 20 May 1970. Like nature in the Anthropocene, the alethosphere is no longer the neutral stage for discourse, but the antagonist to the human subject where discourse returns as the real (i.e. our discarded Alexas and other voice junk, space junk, junk space (Koolhaas), laptop heat heating up our environment, and paid content infotainment back-bathing the sun in electromagnetic waves (they dissipate with the square of the distance, if I remember correctly)). [cf S17, 149, 159] With Lacan's alethosphere, there is a recognition that every discourse produces waste. The alethosphere is where man appears to himself as a technological animal, only it is mostly in the negative form of a producer of waste.

Discussion

infogonks



Defence against the alethosphere
The Radia Smart EMF Hat Beanie, 5G Anti-Radiation, RF Shielding, WIFI Radiation Protection



Warriors of the alethosphere
proposal for visual sensory stimulation device



electric tomato, project no.140, 1969
proposal for mobile sensory stimulation device

Geddes proposed that the Outlook Tower is a permanent institution in the city. Every community, or at the least every city, would have one. With contemporary telecoms, they would be planetary network. The inhabitants of each settlement would have an ongoing project to survey their neighbourhood environment, which material would be displayed in their tower in the form of a continually updated exhibition. The material would be organised geographically beginning with a view of the 'hood at the top and descending from local to global. In this way, each inhabitant would learn about who they are in relation to others. It is hard to imagine how it would work, and what sort of discourse it would be. There would be rotas, inhabitants would have to sign up to tasks based on interests, there would need to be gatekeepers, indexers, and Google/FaceBook/YouTube algorithms, a massive capital investment. Information would become knowledge through the process of collection and display. The tower would become the archive of the alethosphere, a master lathouse amongst lathouses.

The outlook tower project is a rather more optimistic gloss on the alethosphere, something like Arendt's space of appearance, where politics appears in the city, and – because man is a political animal as well as a technological one – where the human subject appears to itself and others in the environment. Even at the risk of producing more waste, the outlook tower is the only proposal since the invention of the theatre by the Archaic Greeks to look at the architectural form of discourse. And if there is a hope of finding a way out of the climate crisis, it is through new forms of discourse. It is where we will develop an environmental ethics for architecture. Information appears as the ground against which the figures of knowledge emerge, the tower is – in effect – a metonymy.

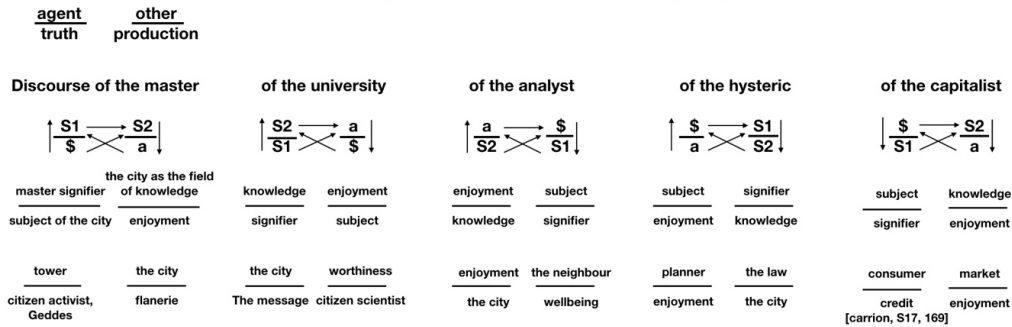
Information is everywhere, but it has to be recognised as such, and put to work as knowledge. This is what discourse does. An urban discourse will put it to work by giving it form. Geddes' outlook tower is a way of intervening the field of human subjects to produce what we might call an urban discourse, by which we mean, not a discourse about cities, but a discourse through cities (rather like Lefebvre's urban society).

Discourse

The fantasy of the master
 the analyst
 the hysteric
 the university
 the tower
 the capitalist

that you are (the) one, that you are not two, that you are a tower
 that you know
 that you touch your body
 that knowledge rules, ok
 that you occupy your place, a locality
 that you are whole, not (a) hole, that you are a tower

The fantasy behind the death drive is the fantasy of capitalism.



If we map Geddes urban discourse onto Lacan's discourse structure, it would look something like:

- S1 = master signifier = the tower.
- S2 = knowledge = the city, the field of information retroactively appearing as knowledge to the subject.
- \$ = the barred subject, the subject of the city, which may play different roles depending upon its position or which place it occupies in the discourse structure.
- a = enjoyment, it is always surplus, like your breath on a cold day, it appears in front of you but warms no one.

In the discourse of the master, the master signifier is the agent = the tower, the tower signifies power, the subject is the inhabitant activist, the master's slave, the one who knows. We could call him Geddes. The agent represses the truth of the inhabitant subject and addresses the city as other. Think the top down planning of Haussmann's Paris, messing up the inhabitants of the Paris' intimate places.

In the discourse of the university, the city-field of information is the agent, masking a master signifier that is whatever emerges in the position of truth that organises this information as knowledge for subjects, presumably something that becomes visible in the exhibition. This will be contested. Communities will have their own truths that will never accord with the truth foisted upon them by the public statements of local and national government, corporations, or NGOs. Especially when those statements relate to climate change and wellbeing. The subject as citizen scientist is produced by the discourse.

In the discourse of the analyst, enjoyment (the agent) addressing the neighbour (subject), producing wellbeing. Bottom up planning, Kowloon Walled City. As says, this discourse is inherently subversive against established social orders. According to Stijn Vanheule, 'Capitalist Discourse, Subjectivity and Lacanian Psychoanalysis', the discourse of the analyst is essentially subversive, on the side of Le Corbusier's pack horse and de Certeau's daily life.

In the discourse of the hysteric, the planner is the subject (agent) addressing the law (master signifier) as other, producing the city.

In the discourse of the capitalist, the agent is the consumer (the subject) itself, the consumer drives the discourse, addressing the market (the market, not knowledge, is the other) producing enjoyment aimed directly at the subject. The master signifier, hidden under the consumer (as indeed it is hidden in the discourse of the university) is a variant of *spend spend spend* or *the more you shop the more you save* or *investor rules OK*, or *credid*, or simply, the capitalist himself pulling the strings from below.

The beginning and the end: an environmental ethics for architecture: from *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to 'Furrows in the alethosphere' (climate change is an intellectual project)

Freud, 'Wo es war, soll ich werden' = Lacan, go Inhabit the place where your desire is. (S7 and Ecrits)
An injunction to take care of the self by taking care of your others.
How to do this in capitalism, in a discourse that replaces desire, an \$, with limitless consumption (incorporation), a whole tower.



'I love the smell of napalm in the morning'

Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) in Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) 49:23

Bill and the boys have just fire-bombed a beach head, now they are going surfing. Then Martin Sheen (far left) will continue upstream to find a madman.





this scene is a failure of architecture = a failure of our platforms for collective intelligence



Capitalism and the death drive..... notes from suburbia



the death drive as it appears in contemporary commodity capitalism

Lorens Holm, Tuesday 15 June 2021