

## running backwards



A soldier in the awful battle of Antietam wrote in his diary that, in retreating he would turn around, slowing down his frantic escape, so that in case he was shot it wouldn't be in the back, which would bring him shame in death. This paradoxical addition of extra risk to avoid shame while at the same time inviting death puts the finger on the paradox of human subjectivity, that guilt continues past life, or even we should say that it *especially* continues past life, that the grave one comes across in the woods (in the story cited by Adolf Loos as identifying burial “the first architecture”) is extraordinary in showing that the name and its *honor* bears more on materiality

— the pile of bones beneath the earth — than it does while life provides the subject with excuses and alibis.<sup>1</sup>

Life is, after all, sheer contingency. The path taken requires that other paths not be taken. The branch on the tree seems to lead outward to a world uniquely defined by the turns taken to reach it. This is Borges' “Garden of the Forking Paths,” a hierarchical brachiated design that seems, like Zeno's arrow, to take one path in order to negate all the alternatives. But, as with the retreating soldier, we turn around at the moment of death and at the same time time itself turns around. The forward Zenonian movement, where time is equated with the space interval covered, is overtaken. Swift Achilles is passed by the tortoise.

As improbable as it may seem, this thought presented itself in the middle of a short excursion I made into the tap-dance spectacles of the 1930s, beginning with Fred Astaire's masterful stagings in *Swing Time*, which I knew quite well, but then forcing myself to look at the work of Busby Berkeley, whose *Caliente* is so hard to watch, by its pushy presentation of every sexist and racist stereotype of the age. Astaire pays tribute to Bill Robinson, the famous Bo Jangles, in ways that make us squirm because we have forbidden ourselves to enjoy the exploitative images of vaudeville, but it is clear that, in the artist-to-artist dialog created within the dance, Astaire as much as says, “I am as black as this guy, but I didn't realize it until I danced.” Berkeley, if we can look past his collaborationist sexism and racism, is a gemologist. More than any other film producer, he sees the contradiction of the spectacle, that on the ground it must be a chaos of motion, fragmentary profiles, and lost horizons; but from the air it reveals itself as a perfect crystal. In *Caliente*, for example, the spotlight on the dancers create shadows on the ballroom floor that at one point seem to have a life of their own. It will not be until *Swing Time* that Astaire perfects this idea in his Bill Robinson tribute, a technological achievement with back-projected prismatic images some ten times taller, dancing closely in synch but then slightly out of synch with a black-faced Astaire.

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<sup>1</sup> “When walking through a wood, you find a rise in the ground, six foot long and three foot wide, heaped up in a rough pyramid shape, then you turn serious, and something inside you says: someone lies buried here. *That is architecture.*” Adolf Loos, as quoted in Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=49008>>.

The Aruba and other West African cultures that gave us tap dancing would have applauded this use of the disloyal shadow, the shadow that can betray us at any time lest we, running down the road in a hasty retreat from destiny, fail to turn around, fail to tend to our reputation. The shadow on the floor takes certain liberties the shadow on the wall must forego. In Murnau's 1922 Expressionist horror film, *Nosferatu*, shadows seem to rush up the stairs in advance of their owner. We are already tuned into vampires' generic dysfunctionality *vis à vis* mirror images, so it's not surprising that shadows are only part-time workers. In Murakami's *Hard Boiled Wonderland at the End of the World*, the dreaming protagonist must check his shadow at the entry-way before being admitted to the Town, a magical precinct where time not only stops, it seems to have lost its distinction between forward and backward. The deal is you can get anything you want if you are willing to let your shadow die. This seems to be the deal being considered by the Confederate soldier at the Battle of Antietam, also the deal being negotiated by Berkeley and Astaire.



Berkeley's possibly most architectural set-piece was done to the tune of "Lullaby of Broadway," in the film *Gold Diggers* (1935). A series of shallow rise broad steps angle around a lookout balcony where a sophisticated couple sit, as the only patrons of some dance-club run by Leni Riefenstahl, dressed to obliterate individual identity in favor of a sexual binary. Boys and girls go through drills like the competing armies, and the high camera angle reveals Berkeley's idea about the body and time. It is a mechanism that "tells time" not in the sense of obeying a rote forward ticking towards the future but in the more literal

sense, that it "tells time what to do." It is the receiver that becomes a transmitter, the radio that, like the Enormous Radio of John Cheever's short story, doesn't just report on reality, it generates it.

I have been harping on the theme of reverse predication for some time now, without any result. There is little if any recognition of this important aspect of human symbolic behavior, despite Marco Frascari's early use of it in his catch-all slogan, "a *technē* of *logos* and a *logos* of *technē*." All we know is that his followers have made this mean anything they want or need it to mean, generally avoiding discussion of the key logic of chiasmus that confers, on every criss-cross expression, an easy wisdom. Construction and construing had the same fame and the same fate. Not all reversals are alike, however. The shadow does not obey its owner, and from the high camera angle of *Gold Diggers* or the back-projected shadows of *Swing Time*, it's clear that architecture is born out of this potential defection. It's what requires us to put, on Loos's mound in the woods, a marker bearing a family name. Honor trumps contingency. We turn around to avoid shame.

There is another high camera angle that should be considered at this point, one that brings the moment of death together with the backward-running timepiece and the soldier running backwards on

the road. This is the operating-room visions of patients who go through short periods of clinical death.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, some eleven hospitals in the U. S. are constructing operating rooms with soffits equipped to hold unusual objects — such as stuffed teddy bears, unique decorative accessories, etc. — so that patients recounting near-death experiences can be interrogated objectively as to what, precisely, they see when they are looking down at their bodies on the operating table. There are two important points for architectural theorists here. The first is that, in looking down from a position after death to a position still surrounded by life, time reversal considers the plan view as the essential form of projection. Second, this is not just any plan view, but a kind of reflected ceiling diagram in that the temporality of the dead soul is projected from above in ways that make the intervening space transparent, so that the present may be superimposed on the past. But, since the “present” in this case is the Eternity of death, the plan may be considered as a kind of logical/temporal crystal, a kind of Busby Berkeley spectacle where identities have been sanded down to remove all traces of individuality, where quality has become quantity, but *exquisite quantity*.

## Bibliography

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<sup>2</sup> Kyle Hill, “Near-Death Experiences: Science After All,” *Science-Based Life* (Sunday, May 31, 2015). Online text < <https://sciencebasedlife.wordpress.com/>>. The hospital experiment aims to extend reports such as that of “a Seattle woman named Maria reported a near-death-experience after a heart attack. She told social worker Kimberly Clark that she had separated from her body and floated outside the hospital. There she saw a tennis shoe with a worn patch on the third floor ledge near her room. Social worker Clark checked the ledge and retrieved the shoe.” Victor Stenger, “Life After Death: Examining the Evidence,” *The Huffington Post* (April 16, 2004). Online text < [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victor-stenger/life-after-death-examinin\\_b\\_1428710.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victor-stenger/life-after-death-examinin_b_1428710.html)>.