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In the 1945 Ealing Studios thriller, *Dead of Night*, five tales present alternative versions of how the buffer we create to mediate our personal space and the external world can give way unexpectedly to a fantastical content. In “The Haunted Mirror Tale,” an antique mirror has retained the trauma of its original owner (his murder of his wife) and passed it on to the 20th-century owner, who finds that the mirror has replaced the image of his bedroom with that of the murderer’s.

Taking the Stendhal Syndrome for a Walk through Popular Culture

zoom event • Sunday October 17 • 1pm Eastern US, 6 pm GMT

iPSA* Presents the fourth in its series of pandemical zoom seminars

(*[institute for psychoanalytical studies of architecture](#))

In a previous zoom seminar, August 15, Kōan Jeff Baysa MD and Don Kunze hosted a group of distinguished guests on the topic of the Stendhal Syndrome, the sudden collapse of the admiring spectator of a painting, statue, landscape, musical performance, or city monument — sometimes resulting in hospitalization or even death.¹ But, doesn’t art in some sense not always aim to have its



Persephone, raised from the dead, Eleusis.

audiences “melt down” — to make the spectator weak in the knees, crying or laughing hysterically? Doesn’t art aim to bring about a physical ecstasy or crisis?

Syncope or heart failure may be going a bit far, but some kind of physical transformation is the admission fee to art heaven, where one can mingle with Michaelangelo and Franz Liszt after regaining composure. This principle goes back at least to the days of the Eleusinian mysteries, where pilgrims to the shrine of Demeter

¹ For a dramatic presentation of a Stendhal event, see the opening scenes of Paolo Sorrentino’s 2013 film, *The Great Beauty* (*La Grande Bellezza*), where a Japanese tourist photographing the panorama of Rome from the Janiculum suddenly collapses and dies. “The Great Beauty” stands for art’s lethal capability, even when it comes in the form of a famous landscape. The antiquity of the Stendhal Syndrome is in fact recorded in popular memory in the phrase, “See Rome and die.”



Puppet-show audience, *The 400 Hundred Blows*, François Truffaut, 1959.

annually witnessed the theatrical rescue of Persephone from Hades. Initiates were sworn to secrecy, and when Aeschylus dared to hint about it he was prosecuted in court and threatened with the death penalty. Kykeon-drinking initiates were treated to the best close-up magic and stage phantasmagoria money could buy, and the effects were universal. Everyone testified that, after the performance, they were no longer afraid of death. That's what's called "getting your money's worth."

Today psilocybin is credited with the same tripping benefits, with syncope not required, but one *architectural* thing should not be forgotten. The Stendhal Syndrome is the breakdown of an imaginary buffer that we construct as a portable stage, a kind of time-encoded spotlight we cast on any work requiring our reverence. Walter Benjamin described it as "aura," claiming that it had disappeared with the Middle Age custom of visiting holy relics, but Stendhal, himself a victim, renewed the idea of aura and gave it its medical credentials. The buffer-breakthrough idea extends the special case of syncope to the general condition of the spectator. ***To witness art with not just our eyes and ears, we must come prepared with our own "aura machine."*** We must use *learned* skills to focus, mind and body, on what art has, historically, promised to deliver. Our readiness constructs a frontal field to crystalize the contract we establish with the work of art that allows us to approach the edge of an imaginary stage, where the everyday gives way to art's portable infinities.

—But, what happens if this edge gives way?

The balance is delicate, the defenses can be easily breached if the artwork's effects are more than we bargained for, or if we



Beatlemania, 1960s



Teresa's holy ecstasy

skipped breakfast. Our portable stage is a variation on cinema's famous "fourth wall," the opening where production crew and equipment stand to make the other three walls seem whole. Our personal, portable fourth wall allows us to have a private audience with the hallowed artwork, but also protects us from theatrical overload. We want to "die of joy" but not really die. As with Bernini's statue of the ecstatic Santa Teresa, we want to simulate the extremity but then return to normal after the show.

The aim is catharsis — "to have a good cry" — whose medical benefits are historically accepted and theatrically replicated on demand.

As a fourth-wall matter, however, the Stendhal Syndrome becomes both an architectural and medical matter. This second zoom seminar calls on physicians, architects, and anyone interested in the art of collapse to discuss ways **to re-conceptualize this forgotten but important phenomenon**. Why? The Stendhal is not just a medical crisis, it's a model for the imaginary construction of a spatial zone for the reception of art and other "transformative" objects/events. It is a symptom that comes with a set of blueprints for converting everyday space into a transactional echo chamber, complete with delayed-action mirrors, spinning thaumatropes, hidden panels, and rabbit holes. It is a circuit board with capacitors and inverter switches. But, most important, this energy regulator has a fuse box to prevent overloads, and this is what gives way when a Stendhal shock suddenly overwhelms the art-lover.

A 1945 film from Ealing Studio, *Dead of Night*, catalogued six of these overloads in, appropriately for the iPSA group, the dream of an architect. Walter Craig is awakened by a phone call from a client asking him to draw up renovation plans for his country house. Craig has just had a dream about visiting this exact same house, so when he arrives later that day, he experiences intense *déjà vu*, and other guests at the house party in progress chime in with their own Gingrich tales of time-travel, omens, doubles, soul-theft, and unquiet dead. Mark Aerial Waller and Don Kunze will present a brief analysis of one of the episodes ("The Haunted Mirror Tale"), and Mark will present "Life in the Freeze Frame: Pulled from a Temporal Continuum," available for pre-screening on Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/58315306>, password: cassiopeia.²

² The film itself consists of life-size cutouts of figures from existentialist cinema and the Parisian intellectual scene of the mid-1960s, spliced alongside their 'home' movie footage. The narration and subtitled text is provided by Louis-Ferdinand Celine's novel, *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932). The standee fails to be fully the subject that it once was in the movie. It is also a stand-in for the movie, ersatz as well as Brechtian, read twice, through 'the gaze of the reader' here the gaze of the camera stumbling around the cut outs.

This zoom will otherwise be unstructured and informal. Participants will be invited to recount personal experiences and on-site insights. The aim is to spend a few hours collectively <imagining a new future for the Stendhal Syndrome>, a collaborative workshop with options for publication, YouTube videos, and/or future events. Stendhal is an idea that has not yet come into its own, possibly because it has found itself between a Scylla of medicine and Charybdis of art. Our ship, architecture reinforced by psychoanalysis, charts its course as a collective effort to merge medicine with theatrics. This zoom invites you to join cast and crew. **Sunday, October 17, 1 pm Eastern US time, 6 pm GMT, 7 pm Central European time.** <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81892625415>.

—INVITATION—

*You are cordially invited to attend
a zoom symposium on
the Stendhal Syndrome*

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HOSTED BY KŌAN JEFF BAYSA, MD AND DON KUNZE

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Sunday, 17 October, 2021

1 PM EASTERN U.S. TIME
6 PM GMT / 7 PM CENTRAL EUROPEAN TIME

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<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81892625415>

MEETING ID: 818 9262 5415



iPSA (Institute for Psychoanalytical Studies in Architecture) is a voluntary non-profit organization dedicated to the extension of Jacques Lacan's legacy to the principal concerns of architecture, landscape, and art: boundaries, subjectivities, surfaces, and the imagination. Membership is open to anyone interested in these projects.

Website: <http://art3idea.psu.edu/ipsa/ipsa.pdf>