

# Architecture, Shadow of the Extimate Smile, Cut of Desire

Don Kunze

ABSTRACT. There should be a book of essays treating the connections between psychoanalysis not as connections but, rather, blurred overlaps. There is a parallax reading of Lacan that sees emergent shapes if and only if the texts are considered orthographically, anamorphically. These essays propose, as any essay about Lacan and Architecture *must propose*, an antithesis to the “about” logic of seeing two subjects separated by a problematic middle. The middle already exists; the question is one of how to cultivate a parallax view that equalizes details as resonant rather than different.

---

Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst of the subject and signifier, did not need to go to the movies. He had, after all, literature in abundance, access to stage plays, musical performances, poetry, and the considerable wealth of Freud’s own encounters with the arts to create a sufficient supply of the *pensées sauvage* to consider how jokes, dreams, metaphors, and metonymies might pin together the machinery of the psyche. Yet, there has never been any question that psychoanalysis has transformed this popular medium into what Žižek has characterized as a university with only one curriculum, film as the teaching(s) of desire.

Why, then, architecture? Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, presents evidence not just of Lacan’s interest but mastery. With Lacan it was never a matter of topical head-on collisions. A series of side-swipes were sufficient to jostle received ideas concerning the Baroque, anamorphosis, the paradox of flight, the uncanny, or virtuality to prove the necessity of re-thinking these issues *en masse* rather than single file. Architecture is not simply an external domain where the shock-waves of psychoanalysis can be shown to rock received ideas, but a force-field that, over some twenty-six seminars and shelves-full of other major writings, employ a principle of resonance rather than sedimentation. Thus there should not be any question that architecture, like film, awaits a similar re-purposing.<sup>1</sup> Lacan already teaches us about architecture; we lack, however, any consolidated appreciation.

Would architecture, like film, become a school of desire? School is not a metaphor or conceit but the physical face of what is distinguished as a place of teaching, different from instruction. What, precisely, is the difference? Architecture provides the best and oldest example, the Tower of Babel. There are versions of this story where the building project is not salient, but architecture in this case makes the point, or rather it is a story where the point is expressly *not made*. The project of connecting earth to heaven is not new, but every instance is unary, a re-working of the facts of the case. Let’s say there’s a circle, a circuit. The circuit is both a form and a movement, and in that movement a polarity is reversed, but, like the twist in the Möbius band, no one can pin-point the exact moment or place where the inversion takes place. At the same time no one can dispute the coexistence of extremities. The desire, like all desire, yearns to make a short-circuit.

---

<sup>1</sup> The proposal: Eleven to thirteen essays by authors whose past publications certify their interest in psychoanalysis as an agency within architecture and *vice versa*: John Shannon Hendrix, John Gale, Andrew Payne, Angie Voela, Francis Conrad, Francesco Proto, Tim Martin, Lorens Holm, Don Kunze. Two authors with experience in media studies will be invited to provide perspective: Todd McGowan and Clint Burnham. Stamos Zographos, Nadir Lahiji, and Wouter van Acker have conditionally agreed to contribute, contingent on scheduling. Biographies and short proposals follow this introductory essay. Although the author herself cannot be present, Joan Copjec’s ground-breaking work on precisely this topic will be recognized throughout for its brilliance and originality.



Tobias Verhaecht, *The Tower of Babel*, 1600.  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp,  
Belgium

As with so many fields Lacan does not enter formally, Lacan's ideas cut to the chase and name the essential formation of what, throughout the full range and history of an established academic enterprise, is the essence. For example, he correctly names the desire for a short-circuit: bi-univocal concordance, the key that promises to decode the puzzles that cast a shadow over the entire range of architecture's considerable ethnographic past, modified spatialities, its development of cultural products and practices, its existence as a discourse and mode of theory. With a 1:1 "decoder ring" the circuit could be cut short by a diagonal feature that is itself a specialty item in the architectural repertoire, the spiral staircase, broad at the base, but diminishing story by story to the point that makes the point, that the vanishing point of divine contact is both a perspectival Nothing and a unary Everything. Who would not wish such a thing?

This Who is of course the Who who sees things from both sides, unlike the clever builders working from bottom to top. The end point that is an end point must be "virtualized," so that the diameter (converted to a diagonal in the process of creating a staircase) should effectively short out the mystery of the double-charged circuit, converting the spiral climb to a zipper zipping the 1 to the 1 for once and for all, puts a definitive end to the time-space delay between cause and effect, now and then, hunter and prey, hunger and satisfaction, salience and shadow. The builders, who spoke Adam's Esperanto, did not like delays, although their construction project, like all construction project, was into costly over-runs. The point of the short-circuit is to install a "once and done" link between signifier and signified tight enough to please any Saussurian.

This is not going to happen. For better or worse, or actually for "the better to be "the worse," the *ou pire*, the disappointed bridge becomes a pier, caught up short by a cloud that ambiguates the ending. Is it left unfinished? Destroyed? Or, like other situations where the Euclidean view from below simply can't cross into the virtuality where the vanishing point is actually a point where parallels converge? What appears as a frown from below is a smile from above. From below, it seems that an architecture or human body is "headless," or "lost its head," or decapitated like the male mantis who has paused to puzzle out the ambiguous messages being set out by the feminine Other. This is the thin-skinned lamella, touchy about its clear inferiority, always wanting to make amens in hopes of a make-up exam.

Out of Babel's desire for a shorter simpler circuit in the style of a staircase — if anything, a chain of signifiers linked metonymically by serial causes and effects, stories inside stories (both literary and architectural) — the case is made: learning is not instruction but, rather, teaching. Psychoanalysis is not instruction (presenting the Analysand with an interpretation of his/her clinical condition) but a half-way measure, a *mi dire*. "I say to you" is, it goes without saying, a half-way measure that adds up to the "1 that is more than one," the one who speaks. It is the clarity of stopping short, metonymically, with and by a cloud that leaves it open whether the client didn't like it, materials did not arrive, or the builders simply ran out of time. If they ran out of time literally (although Lacan says that there is no such thing as the literal), where did they run to? They ran to hide the letter, if we take the question literally, which is to say that architecture is about the *archē*, the primordial structure that, if anything, Babel can lay claim to being.

It seems that the Hebrew version of the Babel story got things wrong. The ziggurat, in the cultures surrounding the Tribes of Israel, actually proclaimed its success in connecting earth to heaven. There was no doubt about its upper flatness, where the idea of the temple condensed and displaced the idea of the sacrifice as a point to be clipped off. The cut would open earth to heaven at the same time heaven was allowed to flow across every part of earth's would-be forms, showing them to be 2-d manifolds (something to be seen and caressed) rather than 3-d chunks resisting inspection. As with the cut on the cross-cap, inside flows to outside and *vice versa* because the inside was always and already an outside, and *vice versa*. If the bottom of the cross-cap looks like it could hold water, it is because the resistance of 3-d chunks to our desire to possess them in one grasp, or flee them along the shortest escape route, was always an illusion required to cultivate and acculturate, collect and curate, circumlocute and prevaricate, stopper and ferment — processes where containment (continence) is required as the necessary and sufficient condition for the desired expansion of unlimited possibilities (incontinence, vicissitudes, *tuchē*).<sup>2</sup>

But, such a clean break in the industrial protocol of stoppering and curing is, in both psychoanalysis and architecture, a legal fiction required to work around the aporia of the cut, which is neither the destructive act, the obscuring cloud, nor the premature failure but all three. The unary tip of Babel's tower is the point of the story. And, as with all stories, the end must answer to the beginning, because the first step was never realized when it was taken to be the first of anything, just as the zero does not know it's a number until the 1, then the 2, and so on announce the project of the count. Not for nothing is meaning retroactive. It is the point of teaching that it be left undone, *mi dire*, and architecture's story as a linked metonymy is *mi dire*-d by the imposture of one floor smoothly making many stories one story, forcing the parallels to meet up at a Real point, in a projective virtuality where the crisscross between inside and outside actually takes place, because inside and outside were never apart, not even for a single moment, as this single moment demonstrates.

This is the difference between instruction and teaching, the difference between a schoolhouse and a jail. Just as Foucault failed to realize about Bentham's Panopticon (another reason to say that architecture is implicitly psychoanalytic) — because he, like all who tread this labyrinth, forget the direction of the gaze — the drives' relation to desire is not bi-univocal but double in the sense of the heroic double. To take one example that connects to the architectural idea of Babel, Castor and Pollux are the perfect Schrödinger couple. They neither live nor die because they both live and die "all over the place," as Lacan said of the subject in relation to the death drive as a defense against premature burial that involves, among other things, premature burial. The neither/nor of the Dioscuri is the both/and of the immortal contronym, the cut. The circuit, the twins' ability to *enjoy* their circuit (for what is a circuit, after all, if not the promise of enjoyment?) comes at a cost of denying the diagonal, the Babel short-circuit of bi-univocal concordance.

---

<sup>2</sup> References to idempotency, insulation, continence/incontinence, are not to be found in contemporary Lacanian scholarship. Even when Slavoj Žižek refers to "incontinence of the Real," he fails to connect to the earlier idea that toilet design has anticipated, or responded to, the three main branches of philosophy (the speedy dispatch of French toilets and Continental philosophy, the Tarrying with the Negative of Hegelian, hence Germanic Critical Theory, and the indeterminate soup of British and North American toilets in keeping with Empiricism and Formal Logic). If toilets are not about continence/incontinence relations, let me know about it. Idempotency's status as insulation covers aspects of territorial defense and security that architecture addresses in multiple ways, from the bio-specific needs of comfort to responses to imagined as well as actual threats, as in the case of the Three Pigs Dilemma. If architecture theory were reduced to the minimal considerations of inside and outside, there would still be a hefty encyclopedia of topics, each anticipating a Lacanian critique.

Apart, Castor and Pollux (immortals in that they tell us what the circuit in psychoanalysis and architecture is and how it works) enjoy life because it is simultaneously death, but in turns. There is the up, the down, the inside and outside, the left and the right. As we know from the “teaching of the mirror,” the stage by which the pre-subject becomes a subject is not a reflection but a medial cut producing two chiral faces, one a mask for the insufficiency of the past (where insufficiency was never an issue), the other a mask for the virtual insufficiency of the future, the obstacle plot, the plot as temporal device and architectural plan that shows from above just what blocks what, and from what point of view (the *scenographic* drawing, where shadows can be cast), the plan penetrates only at the noon, the time of the shortest shadow.

At this place that is simultaneously a time (an opportunity), the instructional drawing becomes the teaching, and Lacan’s *mi dire* logic is applied. The view of the plan is orthographic, non-literal. The viewer must look through the 2-d picture surface to an indefinite, infinitely remote beyond. Stereographically, the pattern reveals, to the forced binocular eyes, its own parallax: a matrix of small, nano-differences. Confronted with these, the neural networks of the viewer do what it must be done to make sense of the data set, they create form with this shortest of shadows. This happens even though it is impossible to happen. Because it is impossible, Real. Cap the brew, the form ferments.

Those involved with olive oil and wine production know all about chirality. This is the “loft” introduced at the molecular level that allows complex tastes to develop. Lacan knows all about chirality, as is evident with the abiding lessons of the Mirror Stage, where the mirror cuts rather than reflects. Left and right are reversed, but not top and bottom. The cross-cap shows this directly, with its continence capabilities below, where Babel is still a working hypothesis, but incontinence above the cloud line. Below is “weather,” above the eternal sunshine of Undivided Mind, Hegel’s Absolute. As with Hegel, so with the weather. You don’t have the 1 without the Other. The Logical Time of architecture is the Prisoners’ Dilemma of knowing when to act, through the trans-subjectivity of seeing that nothing has happened. The question is, what happened to the two black dots? Schrödinger dots they are, their absence is a presence, but a presence of mind that must involve the collective and do away with the idea of the isolated prisoner in the Panopticon, facing the shuttered tower, a case of the sterile spire, a  $-\emptyset$  if there ever was 1. Who’s on first? Is this a case of “Hu,” as in the “Nobody” Odysseus gives as his proper name to the Cyclops still living in the 1:1 of bi-univocal concordance? (The possibility of pronouns did not occur to him, just as the zero did not exist until it didn’t exist before the 1, who made all things bright and beautiful). Zero the Pronoun, Nobody the Everybody ... clip the tip and the cloud rains down its metonymic storm of signifiers. This is architecture in a nut’s shell, a seventh heaven on Cloud Nine, or fourteen if you double the Thesean Labyrinth’s pretended passages to get, Borges claims, the infinity of fourteen, important only because it was two-timed (like all traps).

Ask anyone what architecture is all about, and they will likely say “shelter.” Like any idiotic answer, this says too much, thanks to its too-little. Idempotency is the thermostat set to maintain comfort, though the weather outside is frightful. The neural circuits are set, in fact, though the whethers of outside are indeed fright-, fear-, and Angst-ful. Lacan teaches us that this is not a distance scale but three variations of overlap: uncertain Angst, flight-inducing fear, and fright’s terror of tooth and claw. The science of overlap is not *moiré*, as Derrida argued, but anamorphosis, leading they eyes to uncross themselves with the focus on what is near at hand but to cross again at a point on the horizon at infinity. As Mladen Dolar has

claimed, quoting Freud, that everything Lacan says in the science of psychoanalysis can be covered by the primary condition of anamorphosis: “The remains of the day are not unconscious in the same way (as the unconscious desire). Desire belongs to another kind of the unconscious.”<sup>3</sup>

Any reader troubled by the idea of an Unconscious in the first place will be fit to be tied rather than accept the idea of an anamorphic Unconscious, let alone the idea that the anamorphic *is* the Unconscious, in both architecture and psychoanalysis. The ultimate tip of this conundrum Dolar gives would have been my choice as well: the smile of the Cheshire cat that, part-object that it is, survives the loss of the actual cat. Better than Schrödinger’s neither-dead-nor-alive cat, the comedic Cheshire knows that clouds curve upward, cutting off the Real, submitting to the false accusation of being headless.



Although Lacan always proved keen to engage theories touching on his own, he doesn’t need any supplements to his fugue-like alternations between the interests of the signifier and the subject. For over twenty-seven years, his lectures ranged across a rugged territory including not only classic Freudian case studies and the works of other psychoanalysts, but from the beginning he engaged topology at a sophisticated level that allowed him to visualize the kinds of spaces, invisible to Euclidean eyes, where the psyche established itself through self-intersecting, non-orientable 2-d forms. After topology came knot theory. The Real, it seemed, defied the Euclidean everyday in the same way the smile eluded the cat. The case for a book dedicated to “Lacanian” architecture, for the already-Lacanian reader is not to persuade this proven survivor of the need to add architecture to the shopping cart but to show how architecture has been always present, from the early days of Lacan’s thinking about mirrors as cuts producing the chiral opposition of worthlessness to specular value to the latter day *séance* of Joyce’s always-being-born to always-be-dying of Tim Finnegan, with the parenthetical ... ‘riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the ...’. Two unconsciousness, anamorphic Tim, smiling (again) the smile of an angel.

The case to be made is an attempt to instruct. The lesson to be learned is the lesson already learned, and all that is needed is to wake the dreamer in both senses of sending the dead soul on its way between the two deaths and recognizing the deceased when he/she complains about burning. The two “anamorphic” Unconsciousnesses babble on about Babylon, where the king meets the Goddess for Real. We dare not to see such a Truth, but we do venture to tell it. Architecture tells this tale.

---

<sup>3</sup> Dolar’s quote comes from the Penguin Edition, thanks to which we have the more felicitous translation of “the remains of the day” instead of “the day’s residues,” quite a come-down from Freud’s poetic *die Tagesreste*. Freud’s point is made clear by saying that there are two *kinds* of Unconscious, an “infantile” one equipped to handle the wishes that produce dreams, another that is the trash-heap of rejected left-overs. Freud was right to predict that readers hesitating to swallow the idea of an Unconscious in the first place will put up with the extra demand that they consider a double, that is to say, *anamorphic*, Unconscious. Sigmund Freud, (1916) *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 15:1–240. Sigmund Freud, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol 1: *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973–1986), 261–262.