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from the three critiques to discovery of the true
METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AUXILIARY MEMBERS, and OCCASIONAL GUESTS

Automatic writing was popular as an idea in the late 19c. Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming," was reputedly inspired by his wife doing automatic writing during a trance. Daniel Libeskind's famous "writing machine" made for the Venice Bienale of 1988 was not an entirely original creation. It borrowed from Jonathan Swift's model of a zairja, an Arabic instrument around since the 14c. or before that was designed to mix thoughts up (an ancient version of the veg-o-matic) so that new thoughts appeared. It was the reverse of the modern computer but it could be said that this was a computer that actually could think! The standard procedure of critiquing the binary signifier should not be completely analytic. It should also be creative, productive, and revelational. You aim for unlimited semiosis not to be a magpie but to discover, within yourself, what you "know but don't know that you know." We are all like Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much. Just make sure you don't get shot for what you don't know that you know! Write it down, fast!



W. G. Sebald, master of the technique of "bait and switch" narration (D. Levine)

*** narrative voice**

W. G. Sebald ("Max") taught German literature at the University of East Anglia. On vacation, he walked around the east flatlands of England, recording his travels in *Rings of Saturn*. In *Vertigo*, he uses the narrative voices of Stendhal and an unnamed narrator who travel through Europe in the nineteenth century. One of Sebald's most disturbing techniques is to shift the point of view without notification to the reader. One is in the head of the "author," then of a designated "first person narrator," then of some other character. Consciousness floats. It

inhabits one body, then another. The result of this is that the reader him/herself is disembodied only to be re-embodied, with a new set of objective conditions, contingencies, anxieties, loves.

Why bring this up? In the last newsletter we reviewed a three-part technique for overcoming the tyranny of the binary signifier. In brief, the binary signifier is an ideological ploy to gain assent and favor without making much of an argument or having to back up one's points. A term is chosen and defined by its presumed opposite. Although both poles are abstract and undefined, the contractor of the binary signifier rushes to the middle to find a "suitable compromise" without admitting failure to define his/her terms. Focusing on the equally imaginary/false middle ground, the reader finds him/herself inside a forced choice. Is this better or is that? "In relation to what" is the unanswered question.

The problem is that each of the polar terms has been "inscribed" into its opposite, but this inscription has been concealed ("occulted"). Revealing this occultation amounts to excavating the metaphor that has cast a spell, smothering discourse. The anti-spell (check your grimoires, wizards and witches!) involves metonymy, the signifier that "acts at a distance" and haunts the signifying chain from its exiled neverland. Once you see how ideology has occulted signifiers, you can de-occult them using metonymy. Every good magician knows this: *abracadabra* is based on an ancient palindrome, possibly, or alphabet magic (ABCD). Metonymy works "across the grain" of metaphor. See how the curse, in graphic form, creates a chiasmus:

A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B - R - A
 A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B - R
 A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A - B
 A - B - R - A - C - A - D - A
 A - B - R - A - C - A - D
 A - B - R - A - C - A
 A - B - R - A - C
 A - B - R - A
 A - B - R
 A - B
 A

think "Jasper Johns" here! or the "rotas-sator" square of the Latins



Sebald switches narrative voice to first occult what is happening but then de-occult it, allowing the reader into the space in and around the narrator. (Think "body loading" and "supersymmetry.") This is a variation on the "defective" or "unreliable" narrator technique, where the reader sees how a narrator is "missing the point" but, by missing it, allowing the reader to discover it herself. (Think about Perec's technique of the lipogram.) Luc Phinney provided us a good example of this in Raymond Chandler's short story, "[The Cathedral](#)." When the reader does it herself, the work of art happens *in the reader's head*. This is the best place for art to be, and in this sense, Sebald's floating narrator allows the reader to float as well. In this journey — very much like dreams of flying — we use the sensation of floating to materialize (through reversed predication, by the way) what in actuality is the loss of anxiety, namely the fear of death. How? We die. Don't be afraid, our friend-of-the-uncanny Ernst Jentsch offers the key: that through the cross-encryption/inscription (clever play on words, no?) of life and death, Ad/Da, death inside life and life inside death, our Da is given permanent buoyancy. Although "killed" by the representational transfer of fictional imagination, we are lifted out of our gravitational field by the unexpected switch of narrative *locus*. The "Sebald function" means that, by simply automating ("zairja-ing") the voice, we de- or re-occult its function. The metaphoric illusory space of the story gives way to the metonymic echo chamber of the voice that, made into a frame when constructing a point of view, now comes back into the frame as a violation, a nose that pokes itself into the diegetic representation. Whose nose? Ours of course.

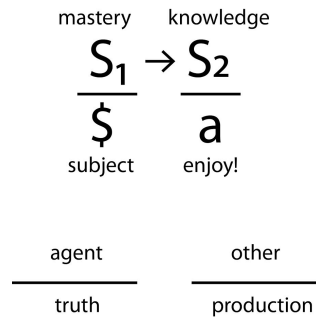
I realize that that was a tough paragraph.

* production, not just critique

Lacan's "discourse of the master" is not about masters who master, it's about all of us who, given a task or duty, are pre-destined to fail. Mastery involved the irony of being told we did a good job while knowing in our heart of hearts that we have fucked up (technical term). Were it not for this irony, there would be no universities, no graduation ceremonies, no trophies in trophy cases (given, mostly, for just showing up). Our society's obsessive congratulatory mode covers up the fact that, although we will have failed in almost everything we are asked to do, we will be made to feel good about "succeeding," although whoever is passing out the diploma will send an "occulted signifier message" that "We know you fucked up; see me later in my office." That is, our pretended success comes at a cost that will be postponed, refinanced, and repackaged. Our cars and homes will be repossessed.

What if we really do achieve something? This happens. The answer is simple: it won't be noticed, it won't be

counted. Your real achievement will be known only by you and those who, like you, have an independent system outside the discourse of the master, which by the way tells you everything.



The subject is cowed by the command/expectation to master things, it is impossible. Knowledge remains alienated (the other), whatever is learned is shown to be false or no longer in style. Nonetheless the subject is required to Enjoy! the process by which ideology is actually "enjoying him/her" (i.e. taking your tuition dollars) and those who opt out (= working class without a college education) are believed to have more fun, to be more fulfilled, enjoy better sex, etc. This dour picture sets the stage for what we must do in the face of this ideological choice, which is always a "forced choice," always pitched in the key of the binary signifier: rich/poor, educated/uneducated, master/servant, liberal/conservative, masculine/feminine, east/west, etc. The "lock is in" once we buy into the metaphors, once we are given the illusion of being able to freely pick a compromise point between the extremes. Actually, *there is no real middle ground*. There is only the recovery of the metonymical bait-and-switch of the occulted signifier, which can be attacked from either side the binary.

In a [rough draft of an essay](#) in process (full version to be sent out later) the primary binary of subject and object is given a twist by showing how occultation has appeared in many historical guises and ethnographic/literary practices. Occultation in fact is the key to subjectivity and consciousness, but *only* through devices, such as the uncanny, can we see what is happening.

A new reality emerges through this critique. Occultation presumes that something has been hidden, but this something has never really existed (= *jouissance*, the thing lost that was never possessed). In recovering it we recover *process*, not the mythical lost object. We see ourselves seeing ourselves. *We are the occulted signifier* — or, rather, what we knew but didn't know we knew is the occulted signifier. We use occultation to create/discover new things!

This is beating ideology at its own game.

How do we distinguish our results from pure bullshit (= the art of creating bullshit for its own sake)? We must proceed empirically and scientifically. At every point where occultation or de-occultation reveals a connection, we must verify that something like this has been discovered, usually at a much higher price than we ourselves have paid using our three-step analysis (see last newsletter), but with the same functional-structural relationships that we have discovered. In the case of the binary signifier object-subject, we apply the rule of cross-inscription. Subjectivity is inscribed/occulted into the center of objectivity while, at the same time, objectivity is inscribed/occulted into subjectivity. This closely corresponds to Ernst Jentsch's proposed "fundamental conditions of the uncanny," the living subject drawn to a pre-fated death (Ad), symmetrically balanced by the dead who does not know how to die (Da). Combining these inscribed positions we land at the revolutionary discoveries of Freud: the Freudian Thing (Ad), the bit of resistant objectivity (automatism) that is lodged at the center of subjective life; and the "partial object," the presumed dead object that nonetheless presents subjective qualities: emotions, power to speak, intentionality — all of the things that led Kant to write about the sublime as "nature with enigmatic, indecipherable intentionality." This corroborates our critique, fine enough, but it demonstrates a finer point: that while life and death as such remain enigmatic abstractions, the inscribed combinations of life and death, subject and object, constitute the Real and material essences of experience. In other words, death means nothing *until* it is inscribed at the center of life; and life is meaningless unless we see it as the *sum total of resistances* to death's finality. We move from categorical thinking to the dynamics of Hegelian dialectics. But, additionally, we are able to add cultures' universal contributions to these fundamental couplings.

If we look back in history, we discover that our own metonymical procedure was in fact employed by Giambattista Vico to unlock the secret of mythic thought. Da becomes demonic nature, whose signs must be interpreted

through divination. Ad is the other side of Vico's theory, the "ideal eternal history" by which humans unconsciously and mechanically civilize themselves. Vico was not totally original; he borrowed from Bernard Mandeville's "Thesis of Bees" by which vices convert into human good. The irony of the binary signifier has become the (Hegelian) *dialectic* of occultation, by which humans are able to "know without knowing" (a favorite phrase of Marco Frascari).



Marilynne Robinson, author of *Housekeeping* (D. Levine)

* you're in good company

More people know about this critique of occultation than you might think. There are a wealth of authors, novelists, and even architects who actively employ occultation through their own versions of epiphany and divination. James Joyce and Sebald have already been mentioned. Carolina Dayer is already in the process of establishing Carlo Scarpa as a master occultifier. Aparna Parikh has suggested the novels of Marilynne Robinson who, like W. F. Sebald, has put the issue of narrative voice up for bid, allowing transfers between the reader and the numerous subjects and (household) objects that populate her works.

You will not be thanked by the binary signifying ideology crowd who insist that metaphor is the poetic alternative to reductionistic scientific thinking. You may more likely be welcomed by geeks from the scientific/mathematical community who use "stochastic resonance" to talk about music and physics in one breath, or who, like Alireza Moharar, talk about "time inside of time" referring to [the Dirac theorem](#). This is tough move in any "humanistic" program where favored authors employ binary signifiers to take sides against despicable practices (everyone has her/his own list). Remember the "good company" rule. If you do the right thing, you will tend to like those who have, before you, also come to the same kinds of conclusions. Remember, for example, that Cervantes was a master of the defective narratory ploy, and his character, Don Quixote, was in the business of de-occulting occulted signifiers (against the "evil magicians" who had de-enchanted the world). And, don't forget the aboriginal Australians who, in their obligatory ritual of "songlines," felt it their duty to sign the world *back* into being.

In this *cage aux folles* technique, you will build community out of action rather than belief. You will not be carded at the door for your credentials but recognized for your sympathetic soul. Just don't play the smart-ass.

Get started with your own de-re-occultations: *abracadabra!*

web: <http://art3idea.psu.edu>

workshop: <http://metalepsisworkshop.com>

