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Figures 1–3. The “alethosphere” and “lathouse” have gone mostly unnoticed by Lacanian scholarship, but as a dyad connection to the modern rage for gadgets connecting to the Internet and, in turn automating data retrieval in hidden ways to commit subjects to a new and ever–more powerful version of the Big Other, these concepts return to standard Lacanian tropes involving geometric self-intersection and non-orientation.

## Is the Alethosphere Not the Perfect Place to Hold a Pandemic?

Don Kunze  
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Thanks to the recovery of a small fragment of DNA from Lacan’s later writings (Seminar XVII), we are able to reconstruct a full–fleshed replicant belonging more to the 2020s than 1070. The story is that, during a conversation with students outside the Pantheon, Lacan turned to a small portable tape-recorder he spotted in the audience and improvised a theory about gadgets.<sup>1</sup> It made almost no sense at the time, but today, in Covid times, it has a curiously outsized resonance. He proposed that gadgets (using a coined term, “lathouses”<sup>2</sup>) link up to a common network (another coined term, the “alethosphere”). It would be easy enough to say that Lacan simply anticipated the Internet (born in 1983), but that would be to overlook the way Lacan’s alethosphere and its lathouses ventured beyond the usual themes of connectivity, utility, and political restructuring. Seminar XVII was already in its own way a gadget, or rather four gadgets, that connected to a global idea of discourses with the spin of a ring coded with a barred-S (\$), S1, S2, and little–*a* against a field marked off into quadrants: Agency, Other, Production, and Truth. This was, as the book’s title said, “other side of psychoanalysis,” psychoanalysis turned inside out, because the ringed characters dance around a dreamer–speaker who imagines free choice but is held in place by the Morris team on their field of play. So, we would be foolish to think that Lacan’s alethosphere would be something as simple as a beach ball. Given *aletheia*’s Heideggerian lineage, this sphere of truth was a place to hide things. Like the Möbius band, the sphere was self–intersecting, a return to a position, but non-orienting, a truth of retroaction, an after that turns out to be a before. There would be no place for unification, as Lacan made clear in Seminar IX, *Identification*. When A returned to A on its trip around the world to prove A=A, it would be an *Autre* embodying the non-orientation we might imagine if we were the young man Magritte showed in his famous mirror, which is to say *pure distinction*. Identification itself would

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Furrows in the Alethosphere” (May 20, 1970), *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 161.

<sup>2</sup> Lacan cites *ousia* as his inspiration, but the term seems to connect to *latere* (to lie hidden) as well as the idea of the “lateral” *derive* or drift of the Situationists. There is also the linguistic idea of the metonymic movement of language with the temporal unfolding of language, with a cloud (or ground?) of metaphoric potential of substitute signifiers as well as the space of “axioms” that shadow every utterance, making any simple statement into a device “acting on behalf” of invisible presuppositions.

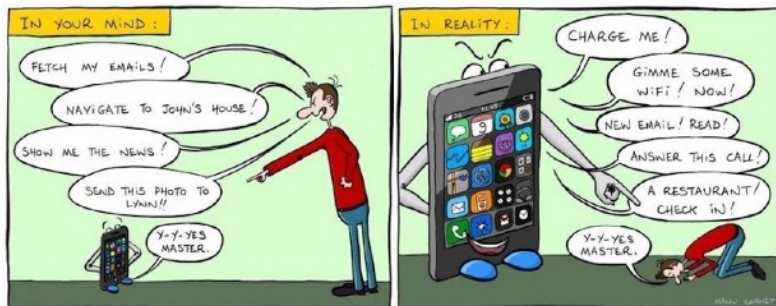


Figure 4. The gadget attracts interest because of its utility and cleverness, but the downside is the connectivity that obliges the user to give up privacy, suffer interruptions, and learn the protocols of use while being unaware of legal consequences. In Lacanian terms, this is “University Discourse,” where the Master ( $S_1$ ) is concealed while the barred subject,  $\$$ , is implored to “Enjoy!” ( $a$ ) but in fact the gadget is enjoying the subject.

data-harvester, demanding our *symbolic* castration with every push of an ACCEPT button. *Jouissance* in this case is not simple, but it is undeniable. The lathouse puts it in a black box, quite literally, the one with a screen and keypad/board, or the aptly named Xbox that provides our fantasies to the surprisingly accurate logic of the *pointçon*, whose  $\diamond$  expands laterally,  $\langle \rangle$ , to open up the L-schema’s portal to connect  $A$  with  $Es$ , through a strategy of late or early. Time is not an issue, but the track is. The diamond shape of its tunnel

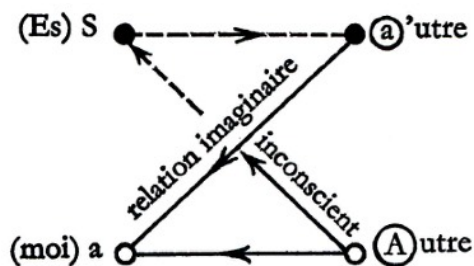


Figure 5. Lacan’s L-schema, diagramming the way that Analysis must counter (“inconscient”) the line of Euclidean conceptual reality between the Analyst and Analysand sitting in the same “perspectival” room, the “relation imaginaire” ( $a$ — $a'$ ,  $moi$  —  $autre$ ).

through Mt. Blah-di-Blah is adamant and Adamic, an indexical speech calling things into being thanks to its bi-univocal concordance, as Lacan called it, a 1:1 proper to the unconscious but not to human speech, which uses a metaphoric “polythetics” proper to sponges, fractals, and archeological sites.<sup>4</sup>

We tune in by twisting the knob to the left a bit and then to the right, until the signal comes in clear. Rather, it is two signals matching, synchronizing, spun to play a devil’s tune without static. Or, possibly we discover that the devil’s tune *was* the static, a critical background noise required by the laws of stochastic resonance, to “amplify” weak signals.

Conveniently, video streaming came into its own just as home viewing became the rage, and now with theaters closed anyway, Lacan’s prophecy is realized. The localization of quarantine and the compensating

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, Seminar IX, *Identification*, session III, trans. Cormac Gallagher (November 29, 1961), 27.

<sup>4</sup> The unconscious establishes bi-univocal concordance indirectly, by using the cut of the signifier,  $S/s$ , as a principle of symmetry that is “delayed” by unfolding a spread of space where self-canceling binaries (signifier–signified pairs) mixed and matched in random pairings to conceal their symmetry. The collection constitutes a “sorites” whose structure is emergent rather than evident, determined by the pattern of negation of the binaries, pair by pair. This thesis relies on the analogy of the middle term of an axiomatic syllogism with the cut of  $S/s$ . The sorites is a cumulative pile (“one grain more,” “one hair less”) whose expansion or contraction ( $\langle \rangle$ ) is both indeterminate and determinative. “Polythesis” allows for missing or displaced data because lateral sequences (the alethosphere) use structure to bridge conditions of presence or absence. Fractal patterning establishes order at all levels and scales, even though the local condition (“lathouse”) tolerates and even encourages disorder.

connectivity of the Internet as a source of entertainment converge on the same psychic, or rather *psychotic* moment, for now we must accept the figure-ground reversal aspect of that paralysis. The field moves across our fixed, staring eyes. But, hasn't this always been the case? Paralysis is a normal part of movie going. Conventionally, audiences play dead in dark auditoriums for the duration of the film. Given that sleep truly does require a period of non-REM paralysis, during which all muscles except the heart and lungs are unplugged and limp; we dream thanks to a Euclidean momentum by which we experience moving about freely over fixed ground. Euclid too is a gadget, robbing the Peter side of invisibility to pay the Paul side of the appearing field. As with the Truman show, we only have to expose the gadgetry to prove that reality is but a dream, that in ordinary experience we are truly the static observer who robs the



Figures 6. *The Truman Show* is a 1998 American comedy film directed by Peter Weir, produced by Scott Rudin, Andrew Niccol, Edward S. Feldman, and Adam Schroeder, and written by Niccol. The film stars Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, a man who grew up living an ordinary life that — unbeknownst to him — takes place on a large set populated by actors for a television show about him. Eventually, he discovers the truth and decides to escape (Wikipedia).

saint of Peter to pay the sinner of Paul to paper-over the gaps in reality to shame the Real to shadow itself.

### *The Truman Show*

Timid Truman was a gentle lad who never suspected anything wrong with his devotion to the name of the father, sustaining his allegiance to Lacan's maxim, *les non-dupes errent* (non-dupes err / the name/no of the father; the father as a no-body). The No of Truman's lost father is transferred to the prohibitional straight and narrow of production-value maintenance, to make sure that the primary televised virtuality of the show, Euclidian to the tune of Sea Haven's fake new urbanism, was the result of an entirely separate kind of virtuality, a *virtuality of effectiveness*, which comes close to defining here and now what Lacan's alethosphere is all about. Within its secondary virtuality of

production, the tech team works fast to re-arrange the props and personnel to cover over Truman's gaps and gaffs, demonstrating how fast the ground must move to maintain the figure's paralysis. To keep Truman's *Es* barred, so to speak, the diamond-hard *poinçon* (◇) was not the fantasy but the fantasy-production apparatus, justifying our identification of it as the first and true *dispositif*. With it, not only can we accept all substitutes (⋈) — for it is a metaphoric operation — but we can expand the system (<>, <...>, <.....>) no matter how many combinations or predications we may add (= the proliferation of episodes of the show), the energy level will always be idempotent, and the circuitry will be preserved from attack.<sup>5</sup> Think of this in an architectural way, of not just building a wall around a town but of circling it to protect it with a magic charm. This is a matter of civic history; and we know the

<sup>5</sup> The hitherto unexplored relation of sorites in the gratuitous expansion of the unconscious and dreams is also an insulation factor. By creating a maze of predications, a buffer is built up in the form of a labyrinth that preserves a linear sequence (it's really a meander, not a maze) while keeping to a fractal folding design (ABA) allowing for depth (A<sub>ABA</sub>B<sub>ABA</sub>A<sub>ABA</sub>...). *The Truman Show* is not only soritic, it is "meroitic." Episodes match to days of Truman's life. No matter how indefinite this number, they are finite, with a story's standard beginning, middle, and end; the story matches Truman's *life*. Presumably the audience occupies the position of angels watching from a heavenly eternity. For a different take on the "meroitics" of bi-univocal concordance, see Richard Bernheimer, "Theatrum Mundi," *The Art Bulletin* 38, 4 (December 1956): 225–247.

charm is chiralistic; circle the town in the other direction and the walls fall down, as per the case of Jericho.<sup>6</sup>

To keep *The Truman Show* palindrome balanced, the show had to order as many left-handed thefts from Peter as it needs to pay the righteous Paul, to keep the Euclidean fantasy moving about the idempotent dreamer, Truman. The historical number of isolation is forty, the customary designation of days and nights of rain, time spent in the wilderness, weeks of mourning or even gestation — whatever it takes to hold saint and sinner at arm's length long enough for the adamant *poinçon* to maintain audience share. The *poinçon* is a kind of screen, but it's also a portal when you split it into a less than and greater than, too early and too late. Refer to the L-schema of analysis, and think “This is the *gimmick* that connects to the unconscious as alethosphere and you will be on the right track, the trick-track. If Truman at least proves to your satisfaction the figure-ground reversal trick of idempotency, he will have done his job of showing the lathouse to be a thing of the scam, the con, the grift. Do not lose sight or “site” of this feature.



Figure 7. The thaumatrope is an ancient device, a round token with images that, when the disk is spun, combine. What is now just a toy was originally a form of prayer or magic invocation to affect a “before-and-after.” cause and effect relation.

Figure-ground reversal is our idea of how to connect this forgotten Lacanian legacy to the dream, then to the unconscious, then to the technology of the collective brain we call the internet, then to the whole matter of stochastic resonance that uses emergence as its operating principle.<sup>7</sup> The palindrome is a numerical expression of idempotency's fight to insulate the dreamer from “denial of service” attacks, the IT name for the Freudian stimulus causing the innocent neuron to clinch its sphincteral muscles until death do us part, into the part-object that will continue the project of *jouissance* but reverse it to have the gadget enjoy us rather

than we it; and to part the two parts of the drive, Nirvana on the right, as it should be, and compulsion on the left, leaving us to revisit the scene of the crime.

### *Back Up!*

Why did Lacan choose such unusual words to define the gadget and its network function? *Aletho* of course relates to the Heideggerian truth of unconcealment. A system capable of covering up is coaxed to illuminate, but basically it's main function is covering, concealing, and preserving. Given that subscribers

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<sup>6</sup> This expansion principle relies on the logic of sorites, which cannot be explained fully here. Let us say at least that, as far as sorites goes, *plus ça change*. Like the unconscious, it accepts all materials knowing that a rule is kept in place just as a door may be locked knowing that the key is in a safe place.

<sup>7</sup> This more ambitious long-term project uses sorites to demonstrate the expandable palindromic structure of predications that Lewis Carroll parodied in his “Amos Judd Puzzles.” Resonance undergoes a two-fold redefinition. First, it is taken from its role as noise reinforcing signal in acoustic experiments in ponds where crayfish, lacking the benefit of white noise, are vulnerable to predator turtles. The noise reinforces the weak signal the crayfish needs as an early warning of immanent attack. In terms of sorites, noise is created by separating predicated and predicating forms of statements, re-attaching them to other statements to complete the required predicate chirality, and presenting the set of re-distributed pairs as a puzzle narrative. Resonance is created by the effect of the two missing elements that, when joined, provide the answer to the puzzle, satisfying Carroll's aim, but for the unconscious and the dream, the two voids constitute a toroid structure that is self-intersecting and non-orienting, thanks to the predicated/predicating form of the “orphan lipograms.”





Figure 8. Thaumotropic logic is used in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, when the actress Judy Barton plays Madeleine Elster, a rich heiress with suicidal tendencies. The retired detective, Scottie Ferguson, is hired by the heiress's husband, Gavin Elster, to create credible testimony once Elster has succeeded in faking his real wife's suicide. Scottie, falling in love with Madeleine, meets the actress later and tries to remake her in the image of his lost love.

to streaming services must pay to unlock stored contents, Lacan's terminology seems to be both apt and clairvoyant. As for "lathouse," the reference is both to *latere*, lying somewhere, lying around, flat, and *ousia*, the Greek for, as Lacan has it, something between the Other and "not altogether Being, but pretty close." I won't pretend this to be a precise definition, but as Lacan elaborates the gadget idea, he emphasizes that we could find lathouses lying on the path, behind windows, everywhere indeed where there is an object caught in the act of stoking our desire. The one thing that is certain, he says, is that if the lathouse exists, then anxiety well and truly has an object. One cannot hold the lathouse in position, it's in a space by itself, a portable non-space. Its space is the function of impossibility. Our aim here today is to show that a lathouse is as real as real can be, that it involves a trick, and that this trick will get you connected to the truth. Were there time enough we would tell about how Vico's thunder initiated

metaphor in the minds of those who first called themselves human, but for now we can simply remind all with ears to hear that the story on the screen commonly asks for nothing less, that our willing suspension of disbelief is our voluntary subjection to the negative *jouissance* of suspense where we accept all substitutions, meaning actors, and require only that the ending answer to the beginning, the condition of both the *récit fort* and *après coup*, the spin that winds every yarn into a Borromeo knot that will never bore but always borrow. "Borrow me-o" sings the tale told by an idiot, so that its sound and fury will move us without having us move an inch, thanks to our premature bury-me-o (on the lone prairie, in this case the real projective plane Lacan called architecture's "surface of pain" after explaining how Daphne, fleeing from Apollo, had no way to flee because she had everywhere to go — the idempotent dream).<sup>8</sup>



Figure 9. After Scottie rescues Madeleine from a suicide attempt, the two fall in love, insuring that Scottie will be even more vulnerable to her delusional relation to her dead ancestor, Carlotta Valdes. The color green dominates Madeleine's obsession with death; when the couple visit the giant sequoias (whose Latin name means "ever green") Madeleine rebukes the trees for their indifference to the continual passing of human life.

### *Vertigo as Clinic*

If we could be permitted to use a filmic example that seems to cover all of these points virtually and efficiently, we would cite Hitchcock's 1958 thriller, *Vertigo*. The first part of the film involves a scam or confidence trick. It's useful to extend the idea of the lathouse to what may be its prototype. All gadgets are in some ways scams. They offer something to our advantage but the main function is to plug us into a network relation where we, like the hapless victims of *The Matrix*, are little more than energy sources. The iPhone is the epitome of convenience. With it we can communicate, get news, coordinate our activities, and access whole libraries of information. What the iPhone gets in return, however, is quite disproportional. It

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar VII).

knows where we are and what we are doing. It knows what we would like to buy and how our personalities have made us defenseless against certain marketing strategies. It harvests our personal data and sells it to third parties who make God knows what use of it. If Anselm had known about the Internet, he would have certainly used this feature to craft a new definition, pairing the lesser than of subliminal workings to the greater than of global algorithms. The *aletheia* of this alethosphere lies in its concealment and its infinite storage capacity. In exchange for our tic-tocs and Instagram selfies, the device digs deeper with algorithms than any hand can reach to expose our inmost thoughts to outmost strangers. We are conned by our little lathouse, we take it lying down, *laterally*, it wants our *litter* to be literal about it. The *alethosphere* will be where the litter always reaches its destination.



Figure 10. Continuing the green theme, Scottie follows Madeleine as she drives around San Francisco in her Mark VIII Jaguar. Her itinerary keeps Scottie “in line” and effectively idempotent so that his track will conclude perfectly and symmetrically at the witness chair where he will provide the testimony necessary for the coroner to conclude that (the real) Madeleine’s death was due to suicide.

In *Vertigo* the Con is a wealthy ship magnate who knows how to power the matrix. The Mark, a retired police detective with a fear of heights will be given the illusion of free will while the Con will guide him, surely and smoothly, into the witness chair at the inquest at the death of his annoyingly faithful rich wife, Madeleine. Madeleine must seem to be mad, and Scottie the Mark must follow her as she drives around town in her green Mark VIII Jaguar. The Madeleine Scottie will be hired by Elster to follow, to keep her out of harm, will not be the true Madeleine, however. She shall be a shill, etymology of “shilly-shally,” in ways we will discover later relate to the operation of an ancient and possibly first lathouse, the “thaumatrope,” a small disk spun on a twisted chord so

that the images on both sides will merge visually, thanks to the beta-function of the user’s neural network. Madeleine takes her car out for a spin to merge, anamorphically, with an historically existent ancestor, Carlotta — car-la(thou)ta — Valdes, a beautiful Latina mission girl snatched up and abused by Madeleine’s wealthy ancestor, who took her child and left her in a mansion to rot in melancholy. The audience does not know what Scottie does not know, that Madeleine is an actress hired by Elster to lure Scottie to Carlotta’s mission where his own mission will be consummated when he fails to climb the bell tower to prevent Madeleine from jumping. He and we will not know that Elster has saved his neck-broken wife to cast off the top at the same time he pushes Judy into the shadows until the police have gone. Thinking he has failed his mission, Scottie adds guilt to his fear of heights, making his testimony at the suicide inquest arrive at its destination with particular authenticity. Scottie the mark matches his impotency to Madeleine’s Stendhal Syndrome. Before the “image” of Carlotta she has swooned to death, although the swoon has had to stretch out to attach Scottie as a lover and true believer. As such, Scottie endures a psychotic breakdown that Mozart cannot penetrate. His idempotency now comes without the illusion/fantasy of free will.

In Part 2, a mentally wounded Scottie wanders around San Francisco in nostalgic reverie. Suddenly he sees a woman who resembles Madeleine and follows her back to her room in a cheap hotel. He convinces her that he means no harm, but then gets her agree to a makeover. He will pay for new outfits and a new

hairdo to make this woman into a perfect duplicate of the dead Madeleine. But, of course, it is as we come to expect. This woman is in fact Judy Barton, the very actress Elster hired for his con. She was the “skill,” the confederate of the con who pretends to befriend the mark. The skill’s turning makes her a perfect thaumatrope; her first anamorph was Madeleine/Carlotta. The second will be spun by Scottie as he tries to work like Pygmalion to breath life into Judy’s Galatea. At this point we should comment on the thaumatrope’s most probable ancient application, as a prayer device to suspend the intentionality of the worshipper as the image spun round, like a Tibetan prayer wheel. Automation insured an insulated passage of the prayer thanks to instrumental cause, the same form of causality used in Catholicism to assure the transmission of the host from wafer to flesh without contamination from the priest’s mortal assistance. Automation here is the same as idempotency. It insulates, regulates, and delivers.



Figure 11. *VERT-igo*’s green theme is the substance of the cloud (of fantasy?) out of which Judy, remade in the image of the lost Madeleine, steps after applying the finishing touches of her costume and coiffeur.

In *Vertigo*, we think mainly of Judy/Madeleine’s *visual* thaumatrope: never a union, always an intersection between the two “voids” the march Scottie around his forced-choice options, neither of which fills the bill of being “the woman I love.” Like the portal of the L-schema, Judy is “too soon” and Madeleine is “too late.” As with the ancient thaumatropes found in Magdalenian caves, Scottie’s spin is more of a lucky charm or even a prayer. The spin is already within the space of the divine, as Sufi dervishes believed. And, although *Vertigo* secularizes this within Madeleine’s obeisance to Carlotta’s “will” to have her join her in

death, the religious dimension remains. And, when Scottie attempts to remake Judy in the image of his lost love, the church of Eros is no less holy, with its references to the magical incarnation of the new Madeleine from out of a green mist. Red and green have been the guiding colors of the story, red filters over scenes in the graveyard, green through the hotel window, red dresses, green dresses, and of course the red jewel shown in the painting of Carlotta that holds Madeleine hypnotized, at least for Scottie to see. There is no clear demarcation justifying symbolic assignments, however. It is as if green and red are fluids running through the veins of the story, circulating its passions and poisons, afferent and efferent.

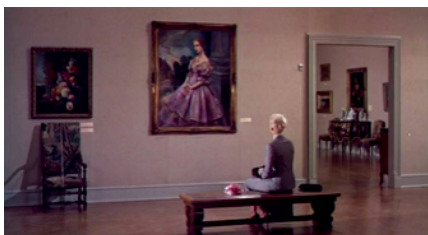


Figure 12. Madeleine’s suicide could be a case of the “Stendhal Syndrome,” the power of artworks to induce illness or even death of its viewers.

We put up with what Tom Cohen has called Hitchcock’s “cryptonomies” because, like a rebus or anagram, we are convinced that a re-arrangement of the runes will turn red and green to gold.<sup>9</sup> Truth will come home to roost, but we are left with the still-warm paradox of what might happen if Scottie at the top of the tower in the final scene is really Scottie at the top of the building in the opening chase scene, just before he falls. Or doesn’t. This could as easily be a *Ground-Hog Day* device that spins between life in death

<sup>9</sup> Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock’s Cryptonomies*, vol. 1, *Secret Agents* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2005).

and death in life. If so, the answer is that the middle term of the scam's syllogism is the same as enthymeme's middle term, a version of  $A=A$  that we should rewrite as  $\boxed{A}A$ , an  $A$  contained by itself, containing itself. If demand is "that which must be repeated," repetition requires that we mis-recognize the original on behalf of our subsequent repetitions.  $A+A+A+\dots=A$ .  $\boxed{A}A$  is a thaumatrope, a skill. It is the axiom of the con, the middle term that opens up the cut between subject and predicate. Within its dehiscence, is the 1 of the body, which Lacan teaches us involves two strokes, up and down, ending with a *hypokeimenon*, a return to one's ground. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Carlotta wins in the end.

### *The Death Drive, the Death Dream, and the Logic of the Scam*

The possibility that the entire action of *Vertigo* might not be "diegetic" in the usual fictional sense of storytelling but, rather, the sharing of the last moments of life of someone who must dream his own ending to correct certain deficiencies before finally departing does not affect our enjoyment of the tale. Whether or not *Vertigo* is a death dream matters not. It is "correcting" our "last minutes of life" within the mortality of the work of art; and, if it happens to be also correcting the fictional hero's last minutes is gratuitous, a benefit to "him" more than us. We, the audience, have no stake in the death dream option. But, it is unusual that *Vertigo* offers us a parallel condition that is very much at stake. "Surrounding" Scottie's perception of his duty to Elster, his obligation to follow and protect "Madeleine," is the con, where he is the mark and "Madeleine" the skill. His actions within this story happen because he is unaware of the scam and the essential part he must play at the suicide inquest.

The con is the frame of the scam, a covering that is equivalent to the dome over Sea Haven that, to Truman, looks like a real sky. The coincidence we must pay attention to if we are to give any real accounting of *Vertigo* is that this false sky is identical to the death dream. We are, as critical thinkers, no longer given the option of rejecting the death dream as a gratuitous possibility. But, how are we to *theorize* this relation? Our contention is that psychoanalysis provides the only effective means of accounting for the otherwise inexplicable coincidence of the con and the death dream. In Lacan's quickly ad-hoc'd idea of an alethosphere whose furrows and ridges are populated with innumerable lathouses (an early anticipation of the idea of the data-mining Internet in the context of neo-liberalism's optimization of global consumer manipulation), we find not just how psychoanalysis has a political face but, in fact, we stumble across a tipping point, where psychoanalysis pivots from its understandable clinical focus to its theoretical role as a universal and revolutionary basis for thinking about subjectivity.

As Lacan might himself have said about such a tip, referring to Freud's own tip in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and *The Future of an Illusion*, it is all the more important to hold theory to a high scientific standard. This is not necessarily the same "science" as that of physics or biology; but one that stems from the splitting of mind/body issues Freud was forced to make in his 1895 essay, "The Project for a Scientific Psychology." This might be regarded as Freud's final "failure" to ground psychoanalysis fully in an energetics model. At the level of the neuron, Freud dealt with the general problem of pleasure, and why an organism should substitute, for the attraction to pleasure and avoidance



of displeasure, any other principle. Why should, he asked after seeing how shell–shock victims of World War I were unable to fantasize their traumas but were compelled to revisit and relive them? Why should desire, Lacan would later reformulate, be required by the Symbolic to state itself as demand, by necessity *repeated demand*, in relation to a self–cancelation of any possible object that would satisfy it?

The issue of repetition is crucial to this move beyond a pure energetics model or a simple behaviorist model. The death drive satisfied, theoretically, (1) the relation to the brain’s neurological mandate of resisting disturbances and maintaining a low-energy flow — the “Nirvana” component; and (2) the automation of repetition evident not just in compulsive behavior but in language and thought in general. Who would imagine the next step? We locate this in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where Lacan treats repetition as a “surface of pain” and connects it to the phenomenon of anamorphosis. Not coincidentally, he relates architecture to the formation of voids with lips that compel circling, often ritualized, that formalizes compulsion and repetition through ethnographic (ritual), artistic (baroque), and poetic (mythological) practices.



Figure 13. Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533, a double portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. The National Gallery, London.

In a film like *Vertigo* — perhaps a contradiction because there are hardly any films like *Vertigo* — these issues are thrown back to Lacan’s “condensation” of the death drive idea in the lathouse and alethosphere. The con, like any gadget, connects a “lower” functionality (Scottie must be made into the perfect witness without knowing why he has been selected) with a “higher” cause (Elster needs to kill his wife to gain “freedom and power”). The binary of low and high become the inside–out that makes Scottie’s “sky” akin to Truman’s. The outer sky of the con penetrates to the center of the mark’s conscious. Scottie is *ashamed* of his accomplishment. On the witness stand, he is brutalized by the examiner’s questions. He suffers a nervous breakdown in fact. He is *interpellated*, the external Other has hatched out at the dead center of his innermost subjectivity, at the location of a void that was

created, from the start, as the place where truth as Real would reach its final destination. We get no clearer picture of truth’s obligation to be a return, a repeat, than in *Vertigo*.

The con is an automated schema. Once set in motion, the shill spins between allegiance to the plan and appeal to the mark’s sympathy and cooperation. Like a prayer wheel, the shill spins with the force of instrumental cause. Its product is anamorphic: Scottie is led to a position, one that corresponds to the position the viewer of Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* must take in order to see the *memento mori* skull, a position whose angle with the picture plane, if we may designate it as  $\partial$ , is minimal, a “just before”

collapsing into the picture plane itself as a material ground. This is a definitive account of the role of the *hypokeimenon* as Lacan introduced it in Seminar IX, *Indentification*. In this famous example of painterly anamorphosis, we find a complete theory of the anamorphosis of the death drive. First, the point of view required to see the anamorphic skull is directly beneath the half-concealed (by a *green* curtain) crucifix: Golgotha, the “place of the skull.” Second, the implied second half of the crucifix commands us to turn the painting over, where we find that the inscription of the time of *vernissage*, the varnishing that finalizes the painting as a work, is “over-accurate”: April 11, 1533, 4 p.m. This ridiculously specific *moment* of completion gives us another critical clue. At that time, in London, the sun was precisely 27° above the horizon. The angle of  $\partial$  with respect to the painted horizon on the other side of the canvas (actually wooden boards) is also 27°. The date and time as well as the angles are replete with the number 3, its square, and its presence as a “sigma value” (the sum of digits of a number; e. g. 1533 = 12, 1+2 = 3).

Why this date? Astrologers whose opinion Holbein valued had predicted that this would be the precise moment of the Apocalypse. In other words, the entire painting may be taken as a cryptogram about the end of the world, but as a painting it maintains an idempotent  $>0$  energy level thanks to the “circuitry” that “demands” (= repeats) numbers, angles, and times. The painting itself, thanks to the necessity to complete its message by turning it over, is a thaumatrope. The  $\partial$  of our anamorphic view is the same  $\emptyset$  that combines the “images” of the two sides in a “phi-phenomenon.” But, we must, as good Lacanians, consider the  $\emptyset$  as the  $-\emptyset$ , the phallic signifier that signifies by its absence (its symbolic castration, its castration *by* the Symbolic) and return to the blur on the *recto* of the painting, as Lacan did, as a mark of the Real.

Anamorphosis has come to stand for quite a lot in our analysis of *Vertigo*. First, it is the subjugation of a mark by a con. Second, it is a spin between two sides of a thing, a Judy/Madeleine shill function. Third, it is the creation of a “surface of pain” that Scottie cannot escape, because his arrow of Eros has been double-pointed. It has shot into two women, not one, but the one it hit for sure did not exist. When we understand the sky that Scottie takes for real as both a con and the cover of the redemption he may be dreaming in the final seconds of life, we don’t see half of what we think we see, or rather our understanding is (necessarily) *mi-dire*, a theory worked out under the law that it will be able say the truth as long as we do not say *all of it*. We recognize Scottie’s architecture, his “surface of pain,” when we connect his non-orientation and self-

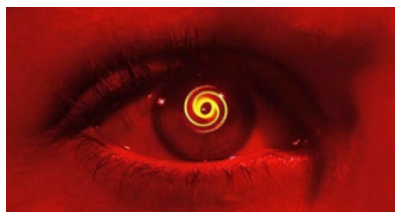


Figure 14. *Vertigo*, eye-spiral, title sequence.

intersection with own *theoretical* relation to non-orientation and self-intersection. This is the *surface* of anamorphosis, where whatever we encounter is an “us” and however we encounter it, it will be an *obverse*, “taken from the other side.”

In such a case, we must consider how, in both theory as well as in the uncanny of architecture, we are compelled to circle the void.