

Krazy-Oriented Ontology¹

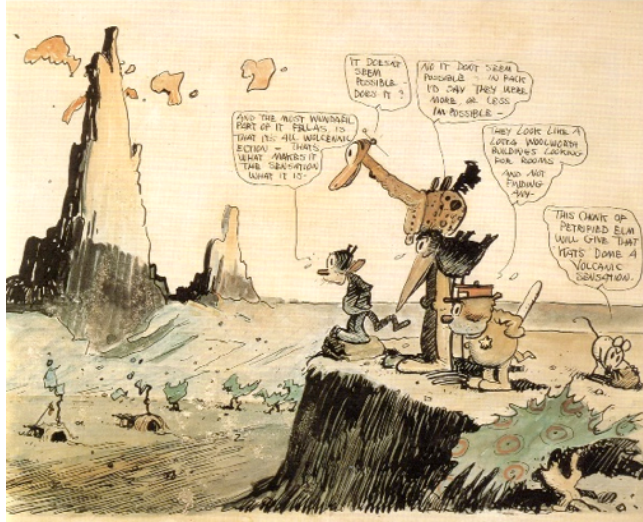
The audiences of cinema do at least one thing that we know about in a literal and definite way. They willingly submit to suffering. Of course the payoff is the “pleasure” that most in the audience report at the end of the film. This is especially true in suspense film, where surprise, fear, fright, and even terror intensify the audience’s displeasure. Nonetheless, such is the stuff of filmic enjoyment.

The audience can scarcely be counted as “heroic” in its voluntary exposure to pain, but the tradition of the passive hero is ancient and famous. Odysseus is the first mainstream figure in Western literature who makes a career out of experiments that he knows in advance will be risky. He suffers but of course his crew suffers even more, an expenditure customarily granted to reckless adventurers. Looking deeper into the psyche for some explanation of why we should sympathize with the hero willing to risk everything and suffer in the process, and (even more) why we should submit to the pains of his adventures, we cannot avoid running into the Freudian “death drive,” the allure of trauma that causes subjects to return compulsively not just to remember but relive past unpleasantness. Repetition is but one component of the death drive. Richard Boothby points out that the death drive’s central appeal comes from its active *unbinding* of the structures that maintain the ego. This was the main theme of Freud’s central example of his young grandson’s game with a spool of thread, tossing it away from his crib and then drawing it back. The fact that the outward loss of the spool created a greater pleasure than recovery puzzled Freud. But, in terms of the Id’s mischievous undoing of the Ego’s carefully contrived defenses, Boothby theorizes that *jouissance* works like the bitcoin of the psyche. Related neither to the market economy (the pleasure principle, or exchange value) or other currencies (the reality principle, or use value), its value fluctuates, often violently, based on imaginary and seemingly random attachments where cause and effect, container and contained, form and matter seem uncannily reversible. The Id, where the pre-subject enjoys a magical realism of megalomania and the ability to transfer will to objects, returns to restore a wild state of “life in death” and “death in life,” evident never as clearly as in the cartoon character of Wile E. Coyote, who, despite serial assured annihilation by the Road Runner, is subject to equally perpetual resurrection.



Isn’t this the case of the audience’s own restorative *jouissance*, which acts aggressively to destroy its sense of security one minute then allow it to enjoy its popcorn and cushy seat the next? This digression is key to the understanding of the “ontology” of the comic strip character Krazy Kat, the featured hero/hero-

¹ The intention here is to replace the word “object” with “Krazy” to argue eventually that object-oriented ontology, the movement to replace the traditional subjective orientation of philosophy with subject-free objects in a kind of Copernican Revolution, is not an ontology but rather an argument about epistemology. As such, it is missing a key clue about the epistemological relations of opposites, something that only Hegel can cure. Todd McGowan has made this point in his perceptive essay, “On the Necessity of Contradiction: Hegel with the Speculative Realists,” *Umbr(a)*, “The Object” (2013): 101–125.



in of George Herriman’s long-running series drawn daily for the Hearst Syndicate’s newspapers. My thesis is that Krazy Kat can be taken in a broad sense — cosmic, in fact, for it is clear that Herriman had precisely such intentions — so that we may submit this classic example of popular culture to a “critical theory audit,” so to speak. We may ask it to inform us about key issues about subjectivity, and because my background is partly in Lacanian psychoanalysis, I will focus on such topics as hysteria, symptoms, but because I also come from architecture and cultural geography, I will invest these terms into ideas about space and time, in particular the

poché of connective tissue that, sometimes void, sometimes solid, serves to circulate. In a building this is the plenum, the air that heats and cools spaces but which quickly morphs into a spiritual medium. In the landscape this is the atmosphere. In Krazy Kat, most of the action takes place out of doors the plenum/*poché* creates a ground against which stellar bodies, horizons, and monuments engage Herriman’s interest in American Indian cosmography. These elements merge with the graphic speech and thought “balloons” just as speech and thought themselves speed along the transparent medium of air.

This expanded view of the function of thought and speech is in keeping with the “metaphysical” nature of the conversations that circulate around the principal characters, Ignatz, the vengeful mouse, the paternalistic Officer Pupp, and the bi-sexual Kat. Herriman establishes an impressive provenance for this conversation. It begins in ancient Egypt, an impossible love that compels Ignatz’s proto-ancestor to write a letter to the sacred Royal Kat, lounging at the top of a column — already so many references to the circulation of words of love by the air! The Lacanian spin comes when the brick used to toss the letter up the cat loses its precious cargo and hits the Kat on the head. The Egyptian version of Officer Pupp arrests the proto-Ignatz, and the saga begins. The Kat will remember the *effect* of the letter (love), while discounting the pain of the brick. The mouse will remember the brick his compulsion to hit the Kat’s head, but forget about

the letter and its message of love. After the first toss, later mouse generations will construct the memory mice getting even for cats’ traditional predatory habits. Officer Pupp will remember nothing but his duty to protect the Kat and arrest the mouse.



The love triangle resulting from these revised memories reverses the “natural order,” where dogs pursue cats and cats pursue mice. In Herriman’s world, the mouse pursues the Kat to take revenge, the Kat misunderstands this motive and presumes the mouse’s love, and the dog surveils the mouse to bring swift justice for every brick thrown in

anger. The Kat, Pupp, and Ignatz are thus very much like Lacan’s model of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, portrayed as rings in the Borromean knot. No two rings interlock; each rests on top of its predecessor so that A>B>C>A, the “repeating element” being randomly indicated. (It could as easily be shown as B>C>A>B or C>A>B>C.) The “final” locking overlap is like the twist in the Möbius band. It cannot be said to exist in any one location. Each character in the strip “gets it wrong,” but with a different kind of error.

The binding force of the Krazy Kat Borromeo rings lies in the way each character is necessary for any internal force to work. Remove one and the “set” falls apart.

Although it is tempting to associate Officer Pupp with the Symbolic (he represents the Law), Ignatz with the Imaginary (he takes appearances at face value), and the Kat with the Real (she/he resists being rationalized), the real Lacanian focus should go to the way the Kat uses Hysteria to convert the pain of the brick to the realization of love. Because the brick is a fragment of architecture liberated for the duration of its speedy trajectory towards the Kat’s head, we might pose Louis Kahn’s question, “what does the brick *want* to be.” “What do bricks want?” could go beside the more familiar slogan, “What do women want?” in posing the enigma of desire in these transposed historical terms. The point is that Hysteria, in Lacan’s terms, relates both to clinical symptoms and a form of discourse that applies more generally to conditions of communication and meaning. The whole of Herriman’s Krazy Kat comic strip could be characterized as hysterical discourse, and the *matheme* for that discourse ($\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2$; to be spelled out later) fits easily into the structure of *Kat/brick* \rightarrow *Pupp/Mouse*. Paraphrasing, the Kat as a divided subject suppresses the brick’s intended use as a weapon of revenge to convert it to a lost message of love, */a*. The observing Pupp specifically must “jail” Ignatz (*/Mouse*) while generally framing the toss as transgressive.

In non-comicstrip life, hysterics *report* pain but secretly feel pleasure; but here the dog sees the Kat’s pain and we are told, *vis à vis* a signature graphic, that the reality is pleasure. We have trouble understanding how a brick hitting a head could represent love; our presuppositions start out with S_1 , the legal as normally perceived, the dog’s point of view, but this conceals S_2 , the story of love of mouse for Kat. Discourse in Krazy Kat, like discourse in most other comics, occurs inside specially constructed cloud-ish frames, with actual speech barely different thoughts or soliloquies. “Off-screen” narration occurs in squared-up frames or in unmarked space, easily recognized as a caption or acousmatic comment.

Where is this going? It seems that the only consistent thing driving the action of Krazy Kat is that it’s got its wires crossed. As with any good story, there is a misunderstanding, but here the misunderstanding goes beyond simple matters and into the make-up of the reality. It’s time to look at how we misunderstand — or, rather, underestimate — misunderstanding itself. There are two things essential to misunderstandings, minor or major. The first is temporal. A misunderstanding sets a scale limit. We expect that the basis of a misunderstanding can be discovered and fixed within the space of the “story” we find ourselves in. Although misunderstandings can lead to worse problems — tiffs, feuds, even wars — the scale change involved shows that misunderstanding is always a local matter.

Locality gives the key to the second aspect of misunderstanding. The problem is almost never external to the situation; it is something structural. There is nothing *fundamentally* wrong, it’s just that our application or interpretation has missed something that can be discovered and put right. Whatever the problems with “the big picture,” they are not misunderstandings but rather our failure to grasp reality. Although the Real may be unpleasant or hard to accept, it is never a misunderstanding. Once we face it, we no longer misunderstand.

This points us to the important truth about what in Krazy Kat seems to be a “misunderstanding machine.” Peppino Ortoleva has pointed out that “Misunderstanding ... in many aspects of life has a specific, and essential role: this is true in love, in which misunderstanding is a problem, often creating chains of problems, but is also a field, because much of making love revolves around borders; this is true in many negotiations, the good negotiator being in many fields of life a creator and a solver of misunderstandings.

This, I contend, is true in the relations of the living ones with death.”² Krazy Kat attracts a variety of sophisticated theory, from popular culture to architecture to philosophy. All the critics agree that Herriman consistently goes past the comic situations typical to comic strips to address such cosmic matters as love and death; and always it is the wistful ambiguity of each story’s relation to its structural reversals of natural hierarchy (dog>cat>mouse) as well as the ability of the materiality of messages to recall an ancient content (the Lacanian “letter that always reaches its destination) that supercharges the strip’s conversations to go beyond comedy into the realms of love and death.

Ortoleva allows us to put this “truth” of Krazy Kat economically: Because the structural relationships binding the *dramatis personæ* of Krazy Kat into their “Borromeo knot” result in what always seem to be (trivial) misunderstandings, the stories always gain quick access to the highest and deepest truths of life.” It is as if Krazy Kat is a “primal word,” a “contronym” embodying two radically opposed entities — triviality and cosmic seriousness — so that every “utterance” of this primal word has the hypnotic power to “take us back” to an original state, a moment just after we have tasted the forbidden fruit giving us knowledge of good and evil, a moment of awakening.

When Freud ran across the thesis about contronyms, he was excited to think that the historical process that had converted single, duplicitous words into two separately articulated, opposed concepts, that the machinery could be reversed — that we could *begin with* oppositions and return to the “klade” or common trunk where thought, in its primal state, had not yet learned to care about negation; where the dead mingled with the living, where night and day were options of each moment. This was the pre-subjective state of early childhood, before language began to stabilize space, time, and causality following cultural templates. Freud called it “autoerotic,” whose limited definition refers to stimulation originating from within the organism. In an expanded field, autoeroticism is the basis for childhood’s natural “magical realism,” where subject and object, inside and outside, past and future, effect and cause, etc. can be reversed to meet the needs of a game or story. Autoeroticism’s two components are (1) megalomania, belief that wishes can be materialized; and (2) figure-ground reversals. What in adult subjectivity seems fixed, with exceptions attributed to neurosis or psychosis, in autoeroticism are simply variables. The adult Law makes childhood a legal exception, and Krazy Kat continually tested the legality of even minor conditions. While it was the expectation that readers would side with the Law, they would be drawn to “side with the criminal” and enjoy the freedom of transgression. In its natural passivity, the audience prefers to suffer with those who, it knows, have broken out of adult subjectivity and escaped into the playground of the autoerotic. The Kat suffers concussion from the brick and the mouse goes to jail, but these punishments are better than the restrictive legal realisms of Officer Pupp.

My elaborate argument about Krazy Kat’s identity with a “primal condition” of contronyms and autoerotic reversals aims to establish a geographic and architectural truth. The setting of the strip, “Coconino County,” Arizona, was actual. Herriman vacationed there with his family. Its stark landscape formations and flora were glyphed but accurate portrayals. Ethnographically, Herriman captured the polyglot colloquialisms with his phonetic transcriptions combining Spanish, Navaho, and Western American pronunciations with Herriman’s own New Orleans accent. “Yeask, wesk, nott, sott — I yamma lone” translates into “East, west, north, south — I am alone.” Or, “Wod ho Sir Kop, an did you mead of wit ‘Ignatz mice’ on your

² Peppino Ortoleva, “Misunderstanding Death: Mourning, Communication, and the Contemporary City,” *Places, Forms, and Memories of Grief in Contemporary Cities* (Conference), Ravenna and Bologna, Italy, October 25–28.

way hidda from tidda?": "What ho, Sir Cop, and did you meet up with Ignatz mouse on your way from hither to tither?"

The Kat's cryptic speech takes us inside a brain used to randomly assigned times, locations, and causes. We must adjust to *it*, rather than expecting it to conform to adult legalities. Within the speech and thought balloons we are pulled into an acousmatic condition, a portal into the contronym, the primal term. At this precise point, I would propose an experiment. This will be an "ersatz" conjecture — one with bad odds but potentially large payoff. The point of picking such an improbable guess is that, even if the main guess turns out to be wrong, its particular *way* of being wrong will yield a harvest of data, much more than if a highly probable thesis is chosen. In the latter case, errors tend to be minimized if noticed at all. With the ersatz claim, each high-risk confrontation yields definitive results. And, in the improbable case that the claim is correct, its original and productive truth will shed light on many collateral issues.

The conjecture is this: What if the enigmatic sayings of the Kat justify considering that the speech and thought balloons may work as much a hinge as a portal. (1) As a portal placed in the air above the Kat's head, its "cosmic references" open to the equally cosmic background, where landscape monuments and omen-filled skies are already intentionally configured as hieroglyphs. (2) As a 180° hinge, the speech/thought balloon rotates the traditional direction of the audience's view; identifying with the background, the audience relates to the "stance of the dead" that conflates readily to the "work of art in itself." The audience sees what the landscape and atmosphere see, a reverse-angle shot.

Consideration of the object's point of view, from the point of its objectivity but as if it were a subject, identifies with the position and function of the Lacanian gaze. It is the object-oriented ontologist's perfect storm, but in the rush to characterize this POV reversal as an ontology rather than an epistemology (which, to be historically and philosophically correct, it is), the speculative realists have missed the point. They have disregarded the fact that they are adapting a point of *view*, and that the view comes with specific conditions. They have forgotten that making this *distinction* (the reversal) is, simultaneously, an *indication*, an *instruction*, a *teaching*. The reversed speech balloon flips the container/contained relationship that traditionally encloses art's "stages" with a generic audience surveillance space. Here, surveillance is looking outward, past the characters on stage and the objects and props around them. What can be seen from this position? Nothing. The auditorium is dark. The audience is in a state of artificially induced catalepsy — dead or rather paralyzed (yet still sensing) for a specifically defined temporal duration.

The audience cannot be said to be conscious, unless their mind wanders from the spectacle of the play. Rather, they are in a state of hypnosis induced with the customary "magic formulæ" — the rising curtain, the lowered lights, the once-upon-a-time invocation of the players who, literally as ghosts, bring the dead work back to life on a stage, which must technically be regarded as a coffin with a glass lid. The corpse sees nothing — this is an important point — in the same way that "self-surveillance" sees nothing.³ There is no "I" planted at the other end of the visual spectrum, just past the footlights. The pure reflexivity of this outward gaze of the ground past its figures, revealed by flipping the speech/thought balloon, reveals that the hinge rotates *through* the condition of representation that first produced the audience/stage binary. What we see from this position is the aphanisis, the *disappearance*, of the audience. We are, from this angle of view, *blind*. But, with blindness comes privileges. Like Tiresius, we are able to experience the *jouissance* of

³ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 40–44.

both sexes and see the future. Like *Œdipus*, we will have seen how the topology of tragedy has drawn us into its interminable traps. Like *Psyche*, before she brings her lamp, we match the other's invisibility to our blindness to get perfect love.

There are three famous uses of this trick that I know of directly. The first, in Krzysztof Kieślowski's 1991 film, *La Double Vie de Véronique*, is the depiction of the burial of Veronika, Veronique's Polish double. The camera is positioned in glassed-in box to simulate the view of the deceased just before earth tossed on top of the coffin shuts out the view of the sky. The second is the rarely acknowledged role of the portrait in Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Portrait." A penniless artist living in St. Petersburg comes across a painting in an art gallery, "a strikingly lifelike portrait of an old man whose eyes 'stared even out of the portrait itself, as if destroying its harmony by their strange aliveness.'"⁴ The old man is the collective image of the readers of the story, whose "orthographic" relation to the artist creates turbulence and eventually destruction. This hinge trick is more than a recognition of art's "fourth wall," the transparent surface through which viewers look in on fictional scenes.



This world-famous painting (Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656) constitutes a model for my thesis about flipping the point of view to depict what lies in the presumed remote background. Comparing the scene to the standard frame of the *Krazy Kat* comic strip, we have (1) a canvas in the process of being painted by the artist of the canvas we are looking at; (2) a mirror that is indirectly reflecting the part of the scene not included in the painting, a part at which everyone seems to be gazing at; and (3) characters who seem unaware of any enigma or puzzle created by the mirror or the canvas. Comparing the canvas with its back turned toward us with the speech/thought balloon in the comic strip, we can regard the optics that makes it possible for the mirror to reflect the contents of the back-turned canvas as "orthographic" in the sense that it constitutes a credible theory of how we can see what we see. Yet, the couple in the mirror alert us to the real problem: that of the necessary location of Velázquez in the position we are standing to view the painting, even when the King and Queen were there.

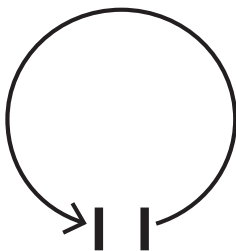
The third and most famous example is *Las Meninas*, the multiple portrait of the Spanish royal family and courtiers including the painter himself, completed in 1656 by Diego Velázquez. The painting shows a mirror in the back of the room where eight members of the royal household watch as Velázquez paints the king, Filipe IV, and his queen, Mariana, who seem to stand in the same spot where all subsequent viewers of the painting must stand, but also a position where, incontestably, the painter himself would have had to stand. The "provenance" of this space is further troubled by the mirror at the back of the room. It shows the royal couple as their likenesses might fill a medium-sized portrait-oriented canvas. The optics of the room rule out this being a direct reflection of the couple in the doorway, but the images are clearly reflections rather than a painting. Careful geometric analysis has confirmed that the mirror, slightly off center, reflects enlarged images of the king and queen from the recto side of the canvas turned away from us. But,

⁴ "The Portrait' (Gogol Short Story)," *Wikipedia*, accessed December 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Portrait_\(Gogol_short_story\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Portrait_(Gogol_short_story)).

the effect is to “subtract” the space between the mirror and the doorway, as if the room containing the eight courtiers and artist had vanished. In other words, we see “what the painting sees,” from its point of view in the back of the room, but thanks to its slight offset, we also see the “orthographic apparatus” that has made this view both possible and explicable.

Las Meninas makes a point that the first two examples lacked the means to make. The 180° flip of the speech/thought balloon that shows us what the background sees also shows us the *production apparatus* that has structured the initial illusion plus the flip that gives us a “panoptical” account. The reverse view is not simply the other side of a whole cut in the middle, at the 180° point. It is 360° *plus* a space of production where the flip is adjusted and calibrated to produce the *correct* effect. Thus, we are justified in calling this an “orthopsychic” as well as an “orthographic” space. The flip/portal works like an authentication element. This is confirmed by the way the Kat’s enigmatic “sayings” use a code to refer to the large meaning elements behind the topology reversing the natural order of dog>cat>mouse with a Borromean alternative, mouse>Kat>dog. Just as guarded gates and passages frequently employ passwords or riddles to test those who would wish to enter, the Kat’s sayings constitute a puzzle, like that of the Sphinx guarding Thebes. Whoever “gets” the Kat’s bizarre sense of humor may pass to the rear of the Coconino landscape, to see things from the point of view of the geological monuments and celestial peculiarities. As Montaigne said, “The word is half his that speaks, and half his that hears it.” But, the two halves add up to more than a whole. They complete a meaning, but they also provide the margin by which the *completion* of the “one-half plus one-half” are summed — in other words, the results *plus* the process. The orthopsychic aspect of this hinge+portal effect of the speech balloon is, as evidenced by *Las Meninas* and present acousmatically in the enigmatic content of the Kat’s “sayings,” the *space of turning* — the point after Wile E. Coyote has run past the edge of the cliff but before he has looked down to realize his predicament; in other words, “the death drive.”

The advantage given by our ersatz experiment with the Krazy Kat cartoon strip is this: we are able to



see the relation of the death drive specifically to the speech/thought balloon and the space it occupies. This, our experiment predicts, is a graphic representation of the death drive. What is our proof? There are two spatial “signatures” of the death drive. One, evident in the *Road Runner* cartoon, is that of repetition. Action thought to be linear is actually curved so that it returns to its origin, but in a reversed position. Artistic recognition of this can be found directly in the “surrealist archive” of René Magritte, the painting entitled *Not to Be Reproduced*, which we reproduce here, contrary to the title’s warning. If anything, Magritte proves that the death drive can be graphically represented. We extend this proof to show how other graphic elements and techniques might be involved, and what they might teach us about the death drive’s relation to orthopsychics, or “self-correction.”

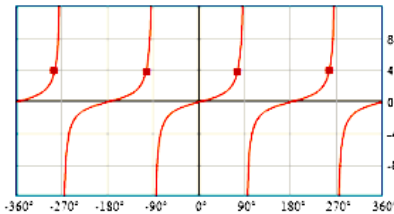


The other spatial signature of the death drive is the spiral or vortex, a formalization of the more general idea of turbulence. As such, turbulence is trauma which, in meteorological terms, is a storm. Turner might be the best candidate to be the painter of turbulence, but his paintings attest to the difficulty of achieving, in a visual medium, anything more than a depiction of the



quality and force of turbulence. To find an alternative, we might turn to Giorgione's famous *La Tempesta*, a collection of isolated subjects and objects in an enigmatic relationship. The main clue to this puzzle arrangement is given in the sky at the back of the scene. A flash of lightning has illuminated for a short second or two, a scene that was before in total darkness. Our blindness is relieved in a flash, but the flash does not give us time to comprehend. We see the elements but not their relationship. We cannot unify the space as we normally do, seeing our glimpse as a "time slice" taken within something of longer duration. Here, the slice and our view coincide. Our visual device — the painting as a "fourth wall view" — cannot cut into a continuum because the continuum does not exist. Here we see the turbulence and nothing else.

It is possible to represent turbulence in a less puzzling way, but ultimately the results are the same. Sandro Botticelli's illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* required the artist to give precise graphic equivalences for the devices that connected geometry to sin, forgiveness, and redemption. Turbulence as a vortex combines the idea of sin as wildness whose effects are nonetheless recombined into a causal system calling for measure-for-measure punishment. In this second type of the death-drive's spatial signatures, the dialectic between a centrifugal randomness and centripetal centralizing gravity adds a Hegelian touch: the more contingency seems to be given full reign, the more the universal is able to manifest itself in Absolute



terms. This effect has even been graphed. As the curve heads off the top of the page, its new incarnation appears at the bottom (a graph of the tangent function). Our surprise comes with the coincidence of opposites, as if the sun had just set when, almost instantaneously, it rises again in the east. The magic is different from the realization that the setting sun and rising sun are the same sun. It is that the *disappearance* and *appearance* of the same sun are the same, and the game

shifts to whack-a-mole logic or, more grandly, re-incarnation, where at the moment of death the soul instantly passes into a new body. The vector of death is the same as the vector of life; both pass through the same planet spheres at the same moment; they are the same line. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* indicates that we have been thinking we have been increasing something to diminish its opposite, but it turns out that, because the two things are the same, we have also been increasing the opposite. This is the logic behind the Somerset Maugham's and John O'Hara's retelling of a tale possibly originating in Mesopotamia, about a servant who is frightened by the sudden appearance of Death in the marketplace and flees to Samarra only to find that Death has arranged to meet him there in the first place. The *flight from* has equaled the *advance towards*. This is the logic of *askesis*, the "retreat" that is also the "advance." The tangent function is a literal picture of *extimacy* (*extimité*), the inside-out logic

Because turbulence is about motion rather than position or direction, *shape* and *configuration* are key. For example, in the classic architectural instances of *askesis*, the monastery, the idea is to construct a refuge to exclude evil. The procedures to *exclude* evil, however, are precisely those that insure that evil will be secured and even magnified and preserved at the very center of the defensive fortress. This is the logic of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), where the royalty have fled the plague by walling themselves up inside a castle. They throw a masquerade party, only to find that the

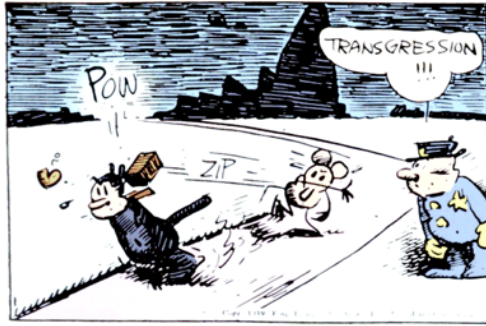
Plague is one of the revelers, whose mask is the Real. The ever-present fear of premature burial fueled this type of tale in the nineteenth century, because catalepsy was a real possibility before the institution of embalming. But, the logic of finding, at the center of one's efforts to exclude, the *very object* motivating those efforts, is "orthopsychic" — a *self*-correction. It is the subject who discovers that his instruments of discovery include *equal and opposite* — "*corrective*" — *mechanisms*. The methodology for looking out is the same as the critical awareness looking in. Mechanism itself is a contronym.⁵ The subject becomes an object in the processes of correction. The Kat and the brick come to terms.

In the comic strip, words are placed in the air above the speaking/thinking characters, establishing this one clear truth: they are not just human-like, they are *subject*-like. There are humans that don't (yet) speak; we call them infants. As they gradually learn language, they also learn how to be subjects — a process that advances by fits and starts. A revolutionary encounter with one's own existence as an image (Lacan's mirror stage) moves the process along, suddenly by a leap, by contrasting the young subject's *social nature* with his/her previously *bodily* and *body-centered* nature. The social subject's reality is external, held by others whose authoritarian role is enigmatically encoded. The pre-subject's reality has been internal — the definition of autoeroticism. The pleasures of internal self-sufficiency are turned inside out by the entry into the Symbolic of language, they must be replaced by narcissism, self-preservation in the name of an externalized spectral look-alike.

In the air of Coconino County, the Symbolic hovers in clouds creating a ground on top of, or inside of, the background. The relation of words to wind is ancient. The connection between meaning and impregnation is condensed in the story of the partridge, reputed to be able to be impregnated by the wind and, thus, "so sexy" that it can do without physical copulation. The "wandering womb" is another product of the relation of words to wind. It is the basis of the tradition that has the Virgin Mary reading at the moment of the Annunciation. The womb wanders until it takes up a position within the organ of the ear, the very organ — the only organ — that is sensitive to the invisible wind and its whispered messages. Thus, we see how the idea of the *matrix* (womb, mother) is a natural basis for the speech/thought balloons that, free from gravity, belong to the air in the same way that what is invisible yet tangible belongs to expressing and understanding. Communication draws its vectorial logic from the winds, which in Coconino County blow from "Yeask, wesk, nott, sott," the Kat's own version of James Joyce's language in *Finnegans Wake*. There are messages placed *inside* the conventionalized words, messages that operate on the level of the *letter* and are thus *literal*. East is "yeask" or "Ye/you ask" — an insightful connection between the dawn and the tradition of prayers that are petitions. North as both naught and knot also provides fuel for excursions into etymology and ethnology.

⁵ This point could be expanded into a discussion of the instrumental cause, the application of Aristotle's *automaton*, or natural chance, to its (seeming) opposite, human action. Fusing chance with action produces the "klade" or common trunk out of which branch the limbs of discourse. This is the act that reveals itself at the same time it is done, the act that "knows what it's doing" as soon as it happens. When St. Peter denies Christ three times, as Christ had predicted, the cock crows and he realizes that the prophecy has been fulfilled "automatically." The prophecy is an example of "kenosis," knowing without knowing. Instrumental cause, which has been appropriated to demonstrate the role of ideology in technological mastery, was originally the causality assigned to the role of the priest in the Mass, which would seem to be the usual combination of formal, final, and efficient cause. The re-assignment is made in the same spirit that the priest's actions are subordinated to the principal cause, Jesus Christ. Instrumental cause *works from the inside* and in a reverse direction in the sense that, instead of moving from single causes to multiple effects, it shows how one effect is the result of multiple "simultaneous" causes.

The literal is the focus of another thing that happens in the air alongside speech/thought balloons. Anger and retribution have freed an earth-bound fragment of architecture, a brick, from being a remnant or precursor of architecture. Outside of an arch or wall, one asks of such an orphan, “what do you want to be?” The obvious answer Herriman gives is, “an agent of love, in all its complexity.” The brick becomes a

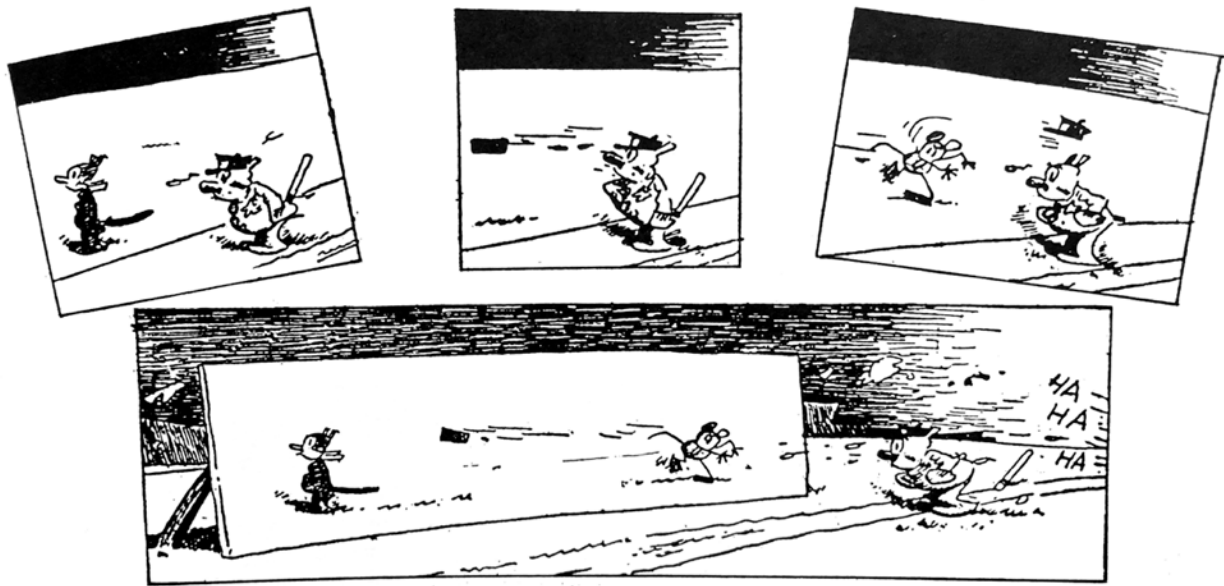


condensation of the idea of instrumental cause, in the sense that the brick accomplishes a desire of which the agent, the mouse, was unconscious. This desire is known by the Kat’s *reception* of the desire, in the sense that the literal message is known in its reverse, “palindromic” sense: the pain is realized as desire, hate is revealed as love. What the mouse has forgotten the Kat has remembered, and Herriman provides the account of the Ur-Kat and Ur-mouse in ancient Egypt (although Mesopotamia would be a more obvious location for the architectural use of mud bricks).

In the strip’s most famous running joke, Herriman configures an “air-logic” that we must place beside the speech/thought balloons as meteorological companions. The overt vector aspect of the running joke cannot be ignored, but no theoretical attention has yet been given to it. This is the orthogonal angle between the vector of bodily impact (“Pow”) and spiritual effect (♥). The impact carries out the mouse’s program of revenge, while *at the same time*, the Kat takes the impact *literally*, as a *memento a-mori*, a message of death and love. The Kat remembers just at the same time Ignatz forgets, and the tangent function, the “Samarra effect,” is in effect. The Kat’s attraction to the mouse is to protect and love it, not to eat it. Nature is reversed, life instead of death but (in light of the antiquity of this long-running romance) but it’s more like *eternal* life — something that is truly “opposite” death in death’s temporality. Love reveals this contronym: life *versus* death is really life *in* and *within* death, something co-extensive to death’s limitless eternity.

The claim of our experiment is that the “logic of the air” is revealed by turning the speech/thought balloon around, looking at it palindromically, from the backside. The gray mist in the background is the indefinite void of the audience. We would be wrong to think that this is the aim of the experiment. We would be ignoring the *turn*, the move from front to back, that has in turning 180° shown us the thin space of the speech/thought balloon itself, a gravity-free zone where front and back don’t matter, where in creating a presentational front that registers with the “face” of the printed words, has also created a back that is “impossible.” It converts the enigmatic sayings of the Kat into passwords — *pass* words — into a motion into the middle space of the strip, whose structure is given by the right angle of the brick toss. A vector concluding its business at the Kat’s head diagrams accurately what goes on in that head. Orthopsychism is the reciprocity between subject and object, love and hate, pursuer and pursued.

In the January 8, 2933 strip, Officer Pupp walks past a billboard representation of the mouse throwing a brick at the Kat. Just as he “visits” the throwing scene in reverse order (he sees the right-to-left throw from left-to-right), he countermands the freeze-frame logic of the comics, where each frame slices through a dynamic time line. Pupp sees reality itself, appearing not as a continuous flow of time but in a comic-strip way; he encounters a *fixed instance*, the right-to-left array of the billboard; but he walks through it left-to-right, reversing the order of destination, the Kat’s head, the projectile, and the origin.



The mouse has set up the “Kopp” but the joke could work only if the dynamic life inside the strip, which we see as a series of frames, was actually only the frames! We catch Pupp jumping with surprise but he is actually looking at a frozen image, momentarily believing that he is the witness of a dynamic action. And, the frozen image has, in his witnessing, allowed time to be reversed. As Todd McGowan has argued, comedy derives from the combination of a lack (the removal of dynamic time as a virtuality of the “space” of the comic strip) with a surplus (the logic reversal of the image exceeds the dog’s comprehension).⁶

Officer Pupp recovers after he realizes his error and goes about his business, as town crier, yelling “All’s well!” (“ALL-L-L-’S W-ELL !!”) The last frame shows the second part of this cry, “-ELL !!” And, in the Hell or “L” or orthographic angle of the story, the mouse hides behind a tree with a brick, waiting to bean the Kat, who is walking out of his/her house in a somnambulant trance. The Kat’s speech balloon is telling: “Wot a gojjiss night for a nice I’ll wokk in my slip.” The night in which one can “just go” is nice for little dream *work* (wokk, also “walk”), which operates, like other messages of the unconscious, inside errors, “slips,” but also during sleep. Turn this balloon around and you get, “I’ll just go work through my dream riddle.” Officer Pupp was “asleep” when he forgot the dimension of time that would have revealed at once the truth of the images he mistook for real. This strip replicates the joke of Parrhasius in his contest with Zeuxis, painting a curtain that the judges would take to be a real curtain, cover-*ing* up the mural he intended to present. Herriman goes one step further in the final frame, using the illusion to reveal to the audience their own buy-in, their own commitment to the convention of the comic-strip frame, presuming a dynamic reality beyond the cut of the cone of vision. “All’s well!” refers us to the Lucretian motto: “All is (a) swell” — the void opened up when the even flow of falling atoms swerves slightly to create a pocket, a *poché*, a gateway.

Herriman isn’t out to pull the wool away from our eyes — that would be a cheap trick. Rather, he floats the frames on the page to show how we have taken on our illusionism passively, voluntarily. Then, we have allowed it to return to the field of spatial representation. It leaves the realm of representation to become a

⁶ Todd McGowan, *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

half-token, the other half of which was broken off in “parting space” between observer and observed. The authenticity of the token is the symmetry of breaking and return, the two halves broken across the same edge. We are implicated in the act of denying implication, there can be no firmer proof than this negation.

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