

Figure–Ground Reversal and the Delirium of “Figural” Space

Don Kunze



Figure 1. Giambattista Nolli. Pianta Grande di Roma, 1745. Detail of the Pantheon, Piazza Navona and surrounding neighborhoods. Nolli's “reversed” view, top. A negative (re-reversed) view, bottom. The negation of negation does not return Rome to its pre-Nolli condition but, rather, reveals the degree of penetration of the “fluid” of circulation uncovered in the original act of analysis. Photo transformation by author.

reverse view. It allowed the Nolli Plan to make explicit what had been implicit: that the multiform experiences of the city were – all along – a collective version of what the individual subject experienced in the dream, believing him/herself to be a figure on a ground but who is actually paralyzed, a ground across which the world itself must move to preserve – neurologically – the illusion of moment/momentum.²

The Nolli Plan as a Dreamscape

The analogy is that of the electrical switch that combines an on/off functionality with idempotency. An idempotent switch is turned on at the first push and stays on. Like the elevator switch, repeated “calls” make no difference; the switch can't be more “on” than “on.” Just as one can't be more pregnant than pregnant or more dead than dead, idempotency asserts a continually

The plan of Rome compiled by Giambattista Nolli in 1748 introduced two stark innovations: the orientation of the city to the north, as opposed to prior “eastern-facing” maps; and the pairing of interior with exterior public spaces, in contrast to inaccessible areas shown as *poché*. In addition to making the map more readable and navigable, the plan promoted a radically new conception – not just a utilitarian urban network but a new kind of space itself, which was no longer a static “ground” on which “figures” could now move in more regular ways, but a figural space, in and of itself giving rise to new kinds of “motilities.”

The white connectivity of pedestrian flow indicated that space had become plastic and, therefore, temporal. Such space could be conceptualized “cinematically,” as moving before the eyes of a viewer fixed by an immobile frame. Precedents for this new plasticity existed, in the form of theatricals, pageants, and, most clearly, *entrées royales*, which paraded elaborate rolling sets with costumed actors past audiences standing still at the road-side. The procession replicated the optical logic of the dream, where the paralyzed sleeper still imagines moving across a static field, while just the opposite is true.¹ Comparing Nolli's flip to the dream allows us to form a rather different thesis, namely that the figure–ground reversal was not simply a

maintained status insulated from further change. In sleep, the dream assimilates an external disturbance and neutralizes all subsequent stimulation to extend dreaming as long as possible. Idempotency is different from a constructed barrier. It insulates by converting stimulus from non-dream to dream, internalizing what is external. Like the Nolli Plan, it is an inversion algorithm. By taking the logic of off/on into the idea of idempotency, something like a “super insulation” is created by using (external) noise as an (internal) signal. Within a range, what would terminate a dream is used to extend it, although in this reversal the inversion is converted into a palindrome, as evident in reports of “event” dreams where a disturbance that has provoked a dream is, within the “interpretive matrix” of the dream, the concluding moment.³

Hysteric’s Motto: “The Nothing of Nothing is Not (for) Nothing”

The palindromic conversion leaves a remainder. The event that provoked waking came first but could be realized as first only retroactively, by a “second” that was the sleeper’s first encounter but the dreamer’s final scene.⁴ What must be first for the sleeper will be last for the dreamer. The palindrome is thus not itself a forward–running procedure followed by a reverse–order construction, but a fractal combining forward motion and backward motion at every scale and detail. This is the essence of figural space–time. By fractalizing the palindrome, idempotency creates the “perfect” insulation, an insulation able to transform annoyance into pleasure by showing that annoyance was “pleasure to begin with.” This is, psychoanalytically, a hysterical procedure.⁵ The hysteric experiences pleasure but reports it as pain and evades discovery by shifting scales and points of view. The Nolli Plan is “the perfect hysteric” that, in reversing figure and ground, creates an ideal idempotency, a flow insulated from noise but tuned in to weak signals, immune to scale and perspective and, hence, able to penetrate every detail, every subjectivity, every perspective view that would frame it as if formed by coincidence.

We cannot, therefore, employ a simple off/on view of Nolli’s negative image. We cannot accept Sarah Grohmann’s adaptation of Isidore of Seville, that of a “clean” binary separating the *urbs*, the walls of the city, from the *civitas* as “not ... the stones but ... the inhabitants.”⁶ The *urbs* was not in fact the material building, but the *distinction* made by plowing a line setting the location of the future urban wall.⁷ Pure distinction also belonged to the word for citizen, indicating the law binding citizens together as a unit.⁸ *Urbs* and *civitas* thus were about dividing and holding together, later materialized as the physical structures of the city and the inhabitants who wandered between them, in the “public” spaces. Although it was possible to formalize this as a figure–ground contrast, the reality was that each term, figure and ground, contained its own latent capacity to convert.⁹ Each “activated” the other but not as a solid antipodal condition but, rather, as the other side of this latency. Instead of writing Seville’s *urbs* and *civitas* as U/C, *buildings* or citizens, a more accurate expression would be U_C/C_U, cross-inscribing each element into the other, as a built-in antipode.

Thus, a figure–ground reversal would look like a division of “immobile” architectural solids and active voids, $U \rightarrow C$, but because C was “always–already” a component of U , the conversion activated a fractal–like back–flow, $C \rightarrow U$. Even the wall was self–converting, by being not just a curved wall but the *curving* of the wall, the way the wall bounds space, making it a kind of architectural citizenship. Building a city is simultaneously a citizenship – of space – just as the (lawful) movement its citizens reveals a latent structural architecture. We can in other words never rely on a binary idea of the figure and ground. As in every human dream, the figure becomes the ground and the ground becomes the figure. Idempotency – identification – results from this universal negation of negation.¹⁰ Fractal and palindromic, it defines a new plasticity, a new basis for assessing what it means to live in a city; a basis more less amicable to the strict binary division of solids and voids than to the Lucretian idea of *clinamen* (flow) and its (productive) consequence: turbulence.

Stochastic Resonance: The Unexpected Involvement of White Noise

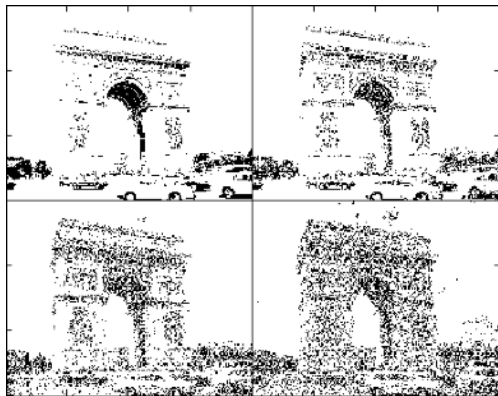


Figure 2. Jamesvoltage. Processed image of the Arc de Triomphe, 2009. Each panel shows a different level of noise variance, with a standard deviation of ten grayscale levels in the top left, fifty levels in the top right, 100 in the bottom left and 150 in the bottom right. Source: “Stochastic Resonance (Sensory Neurobiology),” *Wikipedia*.

Here I would like to play with an actual effect stemming from the nature of turbulence. In an experiment to measure the sensitivity of small hairs on the backs of small aquatic animals hoping to avoid predators, biologists removed all noise from their laboratory pond.¹¹ The small crayfish, who had normally succeeded in escaping turtle attacks, were immediately killed and eaten. When white noise was added back to simulate the normal sound environment of natural ponds, the crayfish successfully evaded danger. The white noise actually amplified and reinforced the weak sound of predator movements, making audible what would otherwise have been undetectable. This finding led to multiple studies of the necessity of stochastic resonance in natural systems dependent on balances of predation and survival.

What if some kind of stochastic resonance is the “glue” holding together, *civitas*–fashion, the palindromic interplay between the two “positions” of negation in the figure–ground reversals. What if, by glue, we involve an idea fundamental to the functioning of latency: that of being a “dupe” who is (voluntarily or involuntarily) passive in the process of conversion, another way of characterizing citizens who willingly submit to the rule of law. This passivity is essential in the dream, where the dreamer has no choice but to submit to the paralysis of non-REM sleep, but it is this very passivity that activates the figure–ground reversal creating the phantasmagoria of the dream. When we say that the “dreamer has no choice,” we refer to the dream’s presentational effect. It’s

something that happens to the dreamer, not anything that the dreamer could intentionally wish to happen. Without this passivity, the dreamer-as-dupe cannot dream. The dream would have no sense of meaningfulness to survive the nonsense constructs brought on by the dream's suspension of negation.

Bathed in white noise, the urban fabric, the *civitas*, becomes sensitive to turbulence that would otherwise fall below the threshold of perception. This sensitive fabric is both within a liquid medium and itself a liquid. Its nature is to flow, to circulate – to circu-late – materializing the curvature of the *urbs*).¹² The inner communicative liquid is separate from the liquid that holds it in position; one disperses, the other tightens. *Civitas* calls out; it is a bi-directional demand: the interpellation of the Law *versus* the *vox populi*. The *urbs* stiffens and binds. The cross-inscription of one by the other means that turbulence of *clinamen*, the flow, is internally self-constraining, self-regulating thanks to this divisive function – an automatic maintenance feature of idempotency. Where physical walls protect by pushing back, idempotency insulates by inverting then incorporating the threat.

From the Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words¹³ to the Antipodal Function of Festivals

Concurrent antithesis, not a “this” at one point then a “not-this” later but a “both-this-and-not-this together” is difficult to conceive in abstract. Fortunately, history has provided examples that show how idempotency-by-incorporation works. The Roman festival of Saturnalia, celebrated in late December, involved the suspension or reversal of norms and customs. Forbidden behavior was tolerated; masters served their slaves; jokes about the emperor were encouraged.¹⁴ As with the later European Carnival or “Mardi Gras,” lewdness, drunkenness, and anonymity combined to create social release, but the effect was to tighten bonds around the idea of what being a citizen meant. Each component transgression amounted to a “stress test,” to prove the validity of the prohibition being violated. Before Saturnalia, the custom of the fool king provided a work-around for the custom of cyclical execution of the ruler. A wandering stranger would be offered the opportunity of being treated as the reigning monarch; after a period of blind obedience to his rule, the fool was summarily killed, and the former king returned.

The idea of a *verkehrte Welt*, a normal world turned upside-down in favor of a rule of non-rule, persisted in the Middle Ages in the forms of masses performed backwards, boy bishops, and profanation of the sacraments.¹⁵ Needless to say, modern carnivals, parades, and Burning Man-style are survivals of the ancient figure-ground reversal idea, where, for things to be re-affirmed they must first fall apart, sometimes in that order but sometimes in a condensed way that combines entropy and re-affirmation in a single retroactive dual, what Lacanians call an *après coup*. Ethnological and popular culture examples demonstrate that this idea is not simply an imposition of theory over the top of culture but, rather, proof of a cultural unconscious able to extend elaborate but effective psychical structures into its landscapes, buildings, and everyday life while knowing nothing of it. All of humankind is like Hitchcock's “the man who knew too much,”

able to feel fear or guilt (or some other emotion) without knowing the source. This extension, and its affective substrate, is what I mean by the “remainder” that is produced by the figural space that Nolli revealed in his figure–ground reversal.

Nolli’s Plan was not the first reversal, but the second, the instance that is our first realization that *there is a count going on*. With this alert, the question of primacy arises: what came first? What was the Nolli Plan before it was the Nolli Plan? We would be wrong to think that this was simple a positive version that the Nolli Plan reversed, making circulation positive and active, while buildings idempotent. What makes a figure a figure is not its color but its motility. The motility of circulation refers to the temporal uncertainty of liquid public space, which must be “convened” by time–specific events, annual festivities, emergencies, spectacles. We can find buildings or monuments because they stay in the same place; but we “find ourselves” in the “midst” of celebrations or disasters. Locale is fixed in the first case, portable in the other. A good restaurant can only be closed or open, but the best restaurant is event–based and volatile. *Urbs* and *civitas* – where instead of mutinous Carthaginians we have fickle gourmets.

What came first? The idempotent *urbs* or clock–wary *civitas*? This is a legitimate question but a stupid one. This is like Oscar Levant’s catty remark about the American actress known for her demeanor of innocence: “I knew Doris Day before she was a virgin.” What something is before it is, is a matter of the two stages of the event, a time before counting and a time after. Once there is

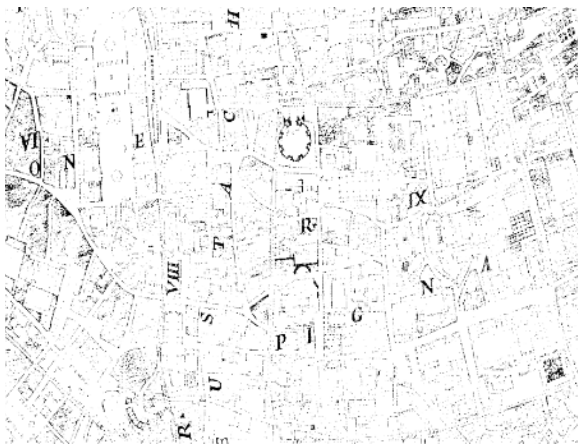


Figure 3. “Nolli dust,” a reduction of the positive and negative versions of the Nolli Plan and subsequent clipping of the graphic spectrum using Photoshop®. What remains is the evaporated and “breathable” ruined signifiers that, having survived the negation of negation of negation, nonetheless identify a “literality” of the Plan as a material scattering across a white surface. Like the casting of dice, what is left is what returns, as Stéphane Mallarmée wrote (physically), like a tide: “*un coup de dés jamais n’oublira le hasard.*”

counting, what is noticed first is realized to be actually second. There is a first that has been suppressed by our ignorance of sequence, our unawareness of the possibility that figure and ground could be reversed. Once this happens, consciousness expands suddenly to take in the fact of something primary, that has just been missed. This moves beyond the binary of figure–ground, static and dynamic, inside and outside, *urbs* and *civitas*. It is the division itself that is seen, the “–” of all of the hybrid constructions that turns out to be also within each of the component agents. It’s not one or the other, so to speak, but the “or” that has made them seem impossibly, antagonistically indispensable to each other.¹⁶

If anything came before the Nolli Plan, it was the Nolli idea itself, as the pure convertibility of civic space, as both *urbs* and *civitas*, idempotent and liquid, communicating and opaque. Before we

celebrate any “urban vibrance” arising from the re-orientation and extimacy of this map, we must recognize that its figure–ground reversal made us aware of a more primary, or primal, function of division itself, perhaps as ancient as Romulus’s division of inside and outside with the plowing of the first Roman furrow.

Endnotes

1_The sleeper, in non-REM depths, is completely paralyzed. See Matthew Walker, *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*, New York: Scribner, 2017.

2_“Moment” here is used in both its temporal sense and as energetics: a quantity expressing a body’s tendency to resist angular acceleration. Moment is equally the resistance of a spinning mass to being slowed or quickened. Circular motion is thus idempotent in its pure rotation, and just so, demand, which Lacan claims to be nothing more than repetition, is like turning on a switch that remains on and resists any further change. The psychoanalytical name for this idempotency is “desire,” which curves the continual repetition of demand into a circle of its own, creating a torus. See Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006, p. 264.

3_The famous event dream cited by Freud, Florensky, and others was originally reported by Alfred Maury and retold in Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick, London: Oxford University, 1999, p. 55. Again, the ideas of moment as an instant of time and as an idempotent buffer against external stimulation are fused. See also Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000. Florensky’s point is that the palindrome that is evident in Maury’s event–dream example is a general but latent aspect of all dreams. This relates directly to his work in the mathematics of the irrational. See Anya Yermakova, “Mathematical Foundation in Pavel Florensky’s Philosophical Worldview,” M. A. Thesis, St. John’s College, Oxford University, 2011. URL: <https://www.scribd.com/document/227287661/Mathematical-Foundation-in-Pavel-Florensky>.

4_The importance of counting is key to Jacques Lacan’s idea of retroaction is an early theme in his work. See the on-line text in English, *Identification*, Seminar IX (1961–62), trans. Cormac Gallagher, *Lacan in Ireland*, URL: http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-Iby-MCL-7.NOV_.20111.pdf, pp. 113–15. Lacan cites the work of Jean Piaget, *The Child’s Conception of Number*, trans. C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson, London: Routledge and Paul, 1952.

5_The complexity of this connection exceeds the limits of this essay. Summarizing briefly, hysteria is not simply a collection of symptoms but a discourse that shows that the agent/agency of the hysteric poses the Other (which can be an “official view,” a received idea, or any authority figure) in terms of insufficiencies that suppress, as the result of being insufficient, a specific knowledge. The coherence of this knowledge can, however, only be felt to be true by the hysteric, a “meaningfulness” as opposed to any specific coherent meanings or interpretations. The universal complaint of language as falling short of being able to express, combined with the equally universal surplus of language, that we always “say more than we intend to say,” form the basis for saying that all speaking subjects are inherently hysterical. This is the reason behind Freud’s famous example of the hysterical Londoner who weeps uncontrollably in front of the Charing Cross Memorial to Queen Eleanor. When monuments “really work,” they disqualify the urban subject as a utilitarian in the process of re-certifying the same subject as a citizen, obliged as much to remote traumas of the past as to sudden catastrophes in the present. See Sigmund Freud, “First Lecture,” *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis*, first published in *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 10 (April 1910), pp. 181–218. URL: <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Freud/Origin/origin1.htm>. For hysteria as discourse, see Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar XVII (1969–70), trans. Russell Grigg, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007.

6_Sarah Grohmann, “The Social Potential of Architecture,” *FCBStudios Journal* 33 [no date given]; URL: <https://fcbstudios.com/explore/view/33>. Saint Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum*, vol. XV, no. 2, New York: Oxford University Press, 1911; in par. 1: “*Civitas est hominum multitudo societatis vinculo adunata, dicta a civibus, id est ab ipsis incolis urbis [pro eo quod plurimorum consciscat et contineat vitas]. Nam urbs ipsa moenia sunt, civitas autem non saxa, sed habitatores vocantur.*” Giambattista Vico tells an illustrative story. When the Carthaginians accepted the terms of their defeat, which allowed them “life, their city, and their substance,” they misunderstood the Romans’ use of *civitas* to mean *urbs*, i. e. the physical buildings of their city. So, when they were required to abandon their *urbs*, the physical city, they refused and broke the terms of their treaty, for which they were punished by having the city burned to the ground. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University; and London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University, 1948), §971.

7_Vico, *ibid.*, §16, elaborates: “Before the use of iron was known, the share [plow] had to be made of a curved piece of very hard wood, capable of breaking and turning the earth. The Latins called the moldboard *urbs*, whence the ancient *urbum*, ‘curved.’”

8_Civitates are defined by Cicero (*Somnum Scipionis*, Book VI, par. 13, of *De Re Republica*) to be “*concilia coetusque hominum iure sociati, quae 'civitates' appellantur; harum rectores et conservatores hinc profecti huc revertuntur.*” URL: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/repub6.shtml>.

9_This is the restoration of infancy's belief in "calling things into being," where naming achieves a certain capture of a thing's essence, what in linguistics is called bi-univocal concordance, or Adamic speech. Freud realized this in his concept of autoeroticism as a de-centralization of the normally coordinated efforts to sort reality out in terms of an observer versus the observed, an actor versus possible actions. The versus simply disappears, along with the ability to distinguish "interior" thoughts from "external" objects and others. Just as negation is suspended inside the dream (a figure-ground reversal in its own right), the distinction between inside and outside, intimacy and objectivity, is suspended with the figure-ground reversal of the Nolle Plan. The "primacy" of subjectivity as autoerotic infancy. Primacy is the suspension of the idea that objects, as objective, are immune to intimacy. See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimity," *The Symptom*, no. 9 (Fall 2008); URL: <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimity.html>.

10_The curious relation between identification and idempotency as a "power to remain the same" is laid out by Jacques Lacan in *Identification*, op. cit. See November 15, 1961, p. 4.

11_Kurt Wiesenfeld and Frank Moss, "Stochastic Resonance and the Benefits of Noise: From Ice Age to Crayfish and Squids," *Nature*, vol. 373 (1995): pp. 33–36.

12_The ancient city, reports Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges in *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, New York: Lee, Shepard and Dillingham, 1874, that a space between the city wall and any buildings, the pomerium, was reserved as a space of religious maintenance. Priests would annually renew this spiritual buffer to complement to the buffer of the solid military wall.

13_This expression is appropriated in toto from Sigmund Freud, "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words" (1910), trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, pp. 153–62.

14_See the masterwork for this festival, Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius, *Macrobius; the Saturnalia*, trans. and ed. Percival Vaughan Davies, New York: Columbia University, 1969.

15_See William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986.

16_This is the fierce turmoil of the “contronym,” the term that contains a radical and permanent opposition that cannot be resolved. Contronyms, such as hostes (both hospitable and hostile), altus (both high and low), and sacrum (both revered and reviled), are not a puzzles to be resolved but rather metonymies or, rather, metalepses, whose resonance points to a meaningfulness operating “at a distance” from the signifying instance. When Freud realized that the Positivist idea of perception as a simple reception of sensation ordered by memory, the drives, and accidents of association was insufficient, he acknowledged the role of suppression and the return of contents from this primary source. The retroaction and simultaneity of primal terms directly provokes this sense of meaningfulness, which is destructive in relation to conscious meanings. See Roger Perron, “Idea/Representation,” in Alain de Mijolla, ed., *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. URL: <http://www.enotes.com/psychoanalysis-encyclopedia/idea-representation>.