

# The “Haunted Mirror Tale”:

## Dead of Night’s Lesson about Latent Signifiers in (Lacanian) Metaphor

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The pedagogical aim of this accompaniment to the video podcast project & interview by Mark Aerial Waller as a part of the Technē Project (Architecture–Humanities Research Association) is to take advantage of two important texts written over twenty years ago that seem to have had little or no effect on architecture theory writing in the U. S. and Canada but are even more radical and relevant now:

Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* 62 (1992): 3–41.

Joan Copjec, “The Strut of Vision: Seeing’s Somatic Support,” *Qui Parle* 9, 2 (1996): 1–30.

The film *Dead of Night* offers the possibility of revisiting these essays in light of the persistent binary divisions of mind/brain, self/world, masculine/feminine, etc. These have revived Positivistic ideology in the human sciences. I believe I have discovered a means around these persistent binaries in the idea of “idempotency.” This is a term more accustomed to computer technology, where it represents strategies to defend against denial-of-service cyber-attacks (DoS), where anonymous malicious attackers flood network servers with service calls, overwhelming resources and preventing legitimate calls from being answered. Idempotency is more fundamentally a mathematical concept, such as  $x + x = x$ , or  $x \cdot n = x$ . Basically, it could be stated as “whatever you do to ‘x’ will have no further effect.” The best example is the elevator button, which, once pushed, is active and not affected by further pushes.

This concept is more informative if we take it from its mathematical and computer environment to cases of the psyche, the mind’s relation to the body or brain, the subject’s relation to the world, or dreaming related to waking. Here, in short, it is the subject’s in-built tendency to destructive overload, what Freud addressed neurologically in his 1895 essay, “Project for a Scientific Psychology.” Freud’s emphasis on the brain, as opposed to the humanist concept of mind, is important.<sup>1</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss has suggested, the “circuits” that define neural structure go past the boundaries of the literal brain, beyond the boundaries of the nerves that extend the brain to the skin, and even beyond that limit, to two successive “beyond,” (1) the immediately perceived world of objects and other subjects as well as (2) the virtual spaces and times needed to “perspectivalize” these objects and subjects into coherent configurations.

If there is an extension of body into world, as Buck-Morss argues, there is simultaneously a penetration of world into body that interpellates the subject in several different modes. The most compelling example, perhaps, is the necessity of the dream to immobilize and anesthetize the sleeper with a logic of “just one more” story or story structure to resist the call to awaken. This was clearly documented in Freud’s famous

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Schuster (*The Trouble with Pleasure*) has cited Norbert Wiener’s observation, that the human brain, like the computer, tends to add complexity to the point of breakdown. For the human, this means that psychosis is possibly embedded, latently, within neurosis, and that the strict division between these two mental states may be misleading.

example of the father who dreamt of his recently deceased son, who appeared to him with the demand, “Father, can’t you see I’m burning.” The son’s shroud in fact had caught fire in the room adjacent to the father’s bed; the aged attendant he had trusted to watch over the corpse had fallen asleep and allowed the candles to ignite the shroud. The dream was not an alarm to awaken to the disastrous fire but, rather, to keep the father asleep. This is the “idempotency” defense of dreams in general. They will “do whatever it takes” to neutralize stimuli that threaten the sleeper’s “system.” Just as neural networks in waking strive to maintain a low-level energy state (Freud’s Pleasure Principle), the dream’s idempotency meets every stimulus with an effective neutralization. This includes the insistence of the binary function of any signifier, where every positive implies a negative. In effect, idempotency negates the negation function of the binary.

The idempotency of the dream is carried into the artwork, in the generic effect of all artworks, to fascinate and mesmerize the audience.<sup>2</sup> Just as the auditorium is designed to immobilize and silence the act of spectating, the story itself offers its own idempotent algorithm in the form of the “one thousand nights and one night” proposing endlessly extended fantasy. This is mathematical in the sense of the original title of *Arabian Nights*: a “time for just one more” proposal that holds in balance two opposed forces of fictional reception: (1) the awareness of the fiction *as such*, while, equally (2) the fiction is considered as real. This balance is more easily seen in the device of the “unreliable narrator,” made famous in Coleridge’s deployment of it in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1834), where an audience is conscripted, much against their will, to listen to an account presented as factual by an agent whose doubtfulness is ever called into question. The idea is to provoke, on purpose, challenges to the credibility of the fictional agent (the ancient mariner) while arranging in advance to stage an effective defeat of such challenges. This is idempotency in a nutshell: a denial-of-service attack is provoked in order to defend the system, in this case, the “dream latency system” that keeps the audience in its seats.

I use “latency” to offer an option that cannot be pursued at the moment. This is taken from Freud’s contrast of latent dream contents from manifest contents that are remembered and recounted by the dreamer. The dreamer cannot remember — because she/he has no access to — the latent contents, if only because these are not contents but, rather *forms*. The form is none other than the form of metaphor, or, rather, metaphor as Form: a form of carrying-across (as its etymology suggests) smuggled goods across a closely surveilled boundary. Lacan is the only thinker to have successfully documented and explained this process, in his *Écrits* and elsewhere, but he has been foreshadowed by two equally important thinkers, Ernst Cassirer and Giambattista Vico. Although there is no time in this proposal to deal with these connections, they are critical for any attempt to take metaphor from its psychoanalytical functions to the worlds of culture (generally) and fiction/art (specifically).

The stakes are no less than the maintenance of the “idem” of the self, the durable sense of identity and presence in the world where, at every point, the integrity of the self is challenged. Maintenance has, since the 1940s, been a mismanaged project, focused on the Ego — not just by ego psychoanalysts such as Kris and Hartmann but in the spiritualist ego advanced by Carl Jung. This is “idem” forced into a Positivist container that is even more binary than the binaries it promises to conquer, as we can see in the case of

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<sup>2</sup> There is an interesting potential connection between art’s function of audience paralysis and “fascination” as, originally, a function of the detached symbolic phallus involved in religious rituals as well as the erect penis displayed by herms, ancient boundary markers. Fascination originally applied to these specific cases, with the same intention — namely, to freeze the viewer.

Jung. Needless to say, this was the central problem Lacan sought to address in his project to rescue Freud's legacy from Freud's followers by exposing the imposture of the ego itself *as imposture* (misidentification within the Symbolic).

The "idem" of psychoanalysis is the deep-structure quantum aspect of metaphor as expanded through other critical ideas: extimity (inside-out conversions), the death drive (idempotency in its dream mode), phantasmagoria, and the topology of non-orientable, self-intersecting surfaces of projective geometry. Curiously, many of these issues can be taken back to the mathematical basis of projective geometry, in the theorems of Pappus of Alexandria (300 a.d.) and Girard Desargues and Blaise Pascal (17c.) — all beyond the scope of this proposal but, thanks to the internet, available to any curious participant.

In the anthology film, *Dead of Night* (1945), a classic British thriller reveals itself as a virtual workshop of the **metaphor as the idempotency algorithm** able to bridge the context and literature of the dream and the field conditions and experiences of art. I make no less a claim than this: *Dead of Night* provides a full menu of the strategies by which the algorithm of idempotency is able to expand its operations past the dream. It is in fact the story of a architect-dreamer who meets with an audience "immobilized" by the British custom of the house-party, where within a comfy room dominated by a fireplace (L. *focus*), attended (this seems too good to be true) by a psychiatrist who is a "stranger-guest" (a WWII refugee from the Netherlands). Each guest is provoked by the dreamer's opening gambit, which seems to be an intentional provocation of those who would mount a "denial-of-service" attack. His Gingrich tale is that he has, in an intense *déjà-vu* moment, realized that he has met all of them before and that the experience has ended tragically. His idempotent strategy protects the dreamer by protecting the dream. Indeed, this happens, as other guests come forward to proclaim their own dreams, each of them challenged by the psychiatrist — who has the most compelling dream of them all. Perhaps due to this last offering/attack, the architect activates his ultimate DoS defense, the murder of the psychiatrist, who has accidentally broken his glasses (i.e. lost his *focus*, his cyclopic relation to the *hearth*, his pledged devotion, *via* Hestia, to his ancestral *manes* — the psychiatrist is Jewish).

*Dead of Night* is in itself a potentially endless circuit of self-referencing phantasmagorias. Lacan would say that we should end this process with the antidote to the *en-charm*-ment of signification (its circularity). We should call upon metaphor to reveal its latent signifier, namely "that which will terminate the blahblahblah of the *mise-en-abîme* of the thousand-nights-and-one night. This in fact is the *passé* of psychoanalysis: an idempotent defense against what is idempotent to begin with ... the signifierness of signifiers, that ever eludes definition while calling on (demanding) definition. Lacan, in short, defines psychoanalysis as "fighting fire with fire," using *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* to open the gates while simultaneously shutting them (hysteria, as demand of/to the defective Other, meets compulsive repetition). What better answers to Freud's call for a possible "scientific psychology," although we must remember that contemporary psychology would be opposed, radically, to this idea insofar as it claims already to be a scientific psychology.