

Dead of Night's Ventriloquist Tale



The relation between the Master's discourse and the Hysteric is evident in a segment of the 1945 British thriller, *Dead of Night* (Cavalcanti *et alia*, Ealing Studios).¹ Sylvester Kee (Hartley Power), an American ventriloquist visiting Paris, looks up an entertainer friend who now runs her own nightclub, Chez Beulah. By coincidence, the night of his visit features another ventriloquist, Maxwell Frere (Michael Redgrave) and his dummy Hugo, doing an act in English. Frere seems to be having some trouble reining in Hugo's contentious and occasionally rude interactions with the nightclub guests. The dummy seems particularly attracted to Kee and suggests, to the annoyance of Frere, that he might consider changing partners. Kee, realizing that he is being put in an intentionally awkward position of considering overtures from a "servant" whose "master" is clearly automating, visits Frere in his dressing room. Kee is greeted by Hugo, but discovers that Frere is in actually some distance away, in the bathroom, apparently unaware of Kee's entrance.

When Kee bumps into Frere and Hugo in a hotel bar some weeks later, Frere is drunk and unresponsive, but Hugo is as alert and rude as ever. Two tipsy women at the bar persuade their male companion to let them pick Hugo up, but they are quickly rebuffed. Frere is understandably assigned blame and punched senseless. Kee manages to get Frere back in his room and puts him to bed, setting the dummy within reach. He returns to his room leaving Frere to sleep it off. Early the next morning, Kee is awakened by a hysterical Frere who claims that Kee has stolen Hugo, and to Kee's surprise and disbelief, Frere pulls Hugo out of Kee's trunk, draws a handgun, and shoots him.

The wound is not fatal, and Kee is interviewed by the psychiatrist who is now telling the story, Dr. van Straaten (Frederick Valk). Van Straaten realizes the full psychotic dimensions of Frere's schizophrenic transference to the dummy and stages an intervention. Frere is allowed to see Hugo again, but quickly the dummy side of his divided consciousness takes over. Hugo promises to abandon Frere forever in favor of a new boss. Van Straaten, watching through the cell window, fails to end the experiment in time. Frere suffocates Hugo and crushes his head on the cell floor.

¹ Mladen Dolar mentions this tale only in his remarkable book on the acousmatic voice, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006), 70; but in effect his whole work could be regarded as a comprehensive account, which goes well past my attempt here, to locate this Gingrich tale at the center of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In the chilling aftermath scene, Kee visits Frere in the hospital at the behest of physicians hoping to break Frere out of his catatonic state. But, the reverse effect happens. Frere's "Hugo side" takes command and beckons to Kee, saying "I've been waiting for you, Sylvester ... I've been waiting for you!"

It is striking that the ventriloquist's tale provides an answer to the relation of the Master's discourse to Hysteria, but even more striking that it does so in unambiguous graphic terms. The Master-Servant *matheme* converts quickly to the *Dead of Night* calculus as ventriloquist>dummy, or V>D. The control, V, uses D as an automaton-slave, incapable (in ordinary terms) of voicing its own opinions and wishes. When this clear flow of causal force (portrayed here as "predicating") is reversed, when the dummy "predicates" the ventriloquist, V<D, an uncanny gap is introduced between V and D that Frere cannot predict or control, >|. The gap is the demonic. It is the remainder of the incomplete process that would otherwise completely define ventriloquist and dummy as binary signifiers. Each of the paired terms is also a binary signifier, in the same sense that "woman" in the couplet man/woman is counted as a binary signifier, since the opposite term is implied.² "Dummy" implies/necessitates "ventriloquist," but there is an irreducible remainder that resists being assimilated within the Symbolic's signifying chains. When cause or predication is reversed, when the dummy is master of the ventriloquist, the gap and the not-all condition is engaged. We realize that even when the conventional relation of the ventriloquist/dummy is in effect, for the act to be at all amusing, the dummy must manifest a necessary minimal degree of autonomy, of mastery. And, because this minimum is essential, it also applies to the ventriloquist, who has, within his manifestation of life, a kernel of death (the dummy is *le mort* in French) operating as an automaton. The gap creates the condition of cross-inscription, where we more accurately specify the ventriloquist-dummy relation as $V_D|D_V$. This is the show-business version of Ernst Jentsch's formula of the essential binary states of the uncanny, the living person haunted/pursued by death and the subject that has, after a literal death, forgotten how to die, the case of Lacan's "between the two deaths."³

It is not difficult to see how subjects and objects align within the ventriloquist/dummy graphic system. Within objects, we find that, instead of a resistant core of thingness, a "thing in itself" free of all subjective penetration, there is instead a subjective core. On the side of subjects, we find, following Lacan's advice about the unconscious's mathematical basis, a kernel of equally resistant objectivity. *Contra* Meillassoux, who places mathematics on the side of the object, psychoanalysis seems to say that subjects

² I have benefitted from Todd McGowan's analysis of the missing signifier in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, where he demonstrates how fundamentalism, positivism, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis each provide a key attitude in relation to the woman as a binary signifier. *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska, 2013).

³ Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8, 22 (August 26, 1906): 195-98 and 8, 23 (September 1, 1906): 203-05.

are, in terms of this inscription of an unconscious that functions as an automaton, like the victims in the film, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, like ordinary subjects but with slight differences that make them “not quite themselves.”⁴ This is Hegel’s trouble with identity, i.e. that $A=A$ is not what it seems, that the temporality of the declaration, the *act*, has made such an equation meaningless.

How is this identity problem caught up in the discourse of hysteria? As Gérard Wajcman has put it, one looks for an entry to define hysteria and finds entire libraries.⁵ The hysteric substitutes pleasure for pain and *vice versa*. Hysteria is not simply a collection of symptoms, it is the appearance of symptoms in general. The hysteric “escapes knowledge” because hysteria is precisely that which gives rise to knowledge. The Symbolic has failed to over-write all of the hysteric’s body, and that remainder becomes the font of symptoms that defy the Symbolic, not by failing to make sense but by succeeding in “out-doing the Symbolic at its own game.” The hysteric’s Truth is this remainder that becomes a source. I propose giving a slightly different reading of the results, the S_1/S_2 that constitute the Other and Production of Lacan’s *matheme* of the Hysteric.

That the Symbolic, S_2 , has been placed beneath the bar as a kind of machine for the production of signs is not hard to grasp. This is the ventriloquist’s act, the space for the hand that extends inside the wood and cloth puppet, the levers and pulls that move the eyes, mouth, head, etc. in convincing ways. But, this hollow concealed passageway turns out, in Hugo’s case, to be an *organ* independent of the ventriloquist’s hand that occupies it. Even when the hand is there, the hollow space and mechanisms exert a residual autonomy, a push-back. The Master above the bar in the *matheme* is in this example schizophrenic, to be sure, but his schizophrenia sheds a useful light on Hysteric discourse’s S_1 in general. Conventionally, the ventriloquist acts on the dummy, but in the reality of hysteria, it is the dummy that takes control, reversing the causal arrow: $D > V$. The relation between the two states is not “clean,” there is a remainder, and that is the hollow space inside the dummy, a void that becomes an organ. Like every passageway, entry is conditional. In fact, who may occupy this passageway is the subject of the jealousy that is the basis of the story. Hugo is feminized to the degree that this passageway is sexualized, the basis of the love ~~relationship~~ between ventriloquist and dummy. (The strike-through indicates, following Lacan, how the dummy’s possession, thanks to this sexualization of the “vocal passage,” is a matter of the “not-all.”

If the Symbolic fails to gain complete control over the dummy, it is this organ/passage that takes on an uncanny life of its own, where it is able to do without the ventriloquist’s hand. It becomes a vocal/sexual passage, terminating (as it does in fact) in the puppet’s mouth. This directly correlates to the

⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁵ Gérard Wajcman, “The Hysteric’s Discourse,” *Lacan Dot Com*. URL: <http://www.lacan.com/hystericdisc.htm#5x>. A starter index to this library can be found in Mady Schutzman, *The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, & Advertising* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999).

division of the ventriloquist that is the focus of the prison psychiatrist's, van Straaten's, interest. Is there a more general interpretation of Frere's split personality? Although I can find no historical basis for this comparison, the S_1 works like the middle term of the "enthymeme," the rhetorical syllogism. Every middle term is necessarily bi-polar. It relates first to the subject of the conclusion, then to the predicate (defining predicate as that which is wholly contained by the subject). All *men* are mortal, Socrates is a *man*. Mortal>men, men>Socrates In the enthymeme the middle term, men, ><, is supplied by the audience, silently. It is the glue that can be silent or voiced, visible or invisible, present or absent, dead or alive.

All Master Signifiers, I claim, partake of this bi-polar condition. This is what allows them to structure other signifiers while they themselves remain fundamentally contradictory. In Žižek's favorite example, the antisemitic's "Jew" is both wretchedly filthy and punctiliously clean, abjectly poor and obsessively rich. The binary structure provides a lock for the way signifiers of Jewishness will always deliver up the required results. Our example from *Dead of Night* testifies to the way in which popular culture always seems to recognize this principle. There are two modes of reading this final tale in the film, and the two modes correspond to two modalities inherent in the discourse of the Hysteric. The first mode is clinical and realistic: Frere is a schizophrenic whose personality has split off a rude, promiscuous adventurer, "an expression of the repressed Id," in Freudian terms. The second mode is uncanny, fantastic. The dummy's autonomy cannot be fully covered by the clinical explanation. It is the kernel of life within the dead puppet that corresponds to the automatism of Frere's schizophrenia, D_V to V_D .



Because the enthymeme's middle term, ><, is "silent," we should look at the way in which the arrow connecting S to S_1 in the discourse of the Hysteric, the "message from the Agent to the Other" in the standard reading of the Lacanian *matheme*, is a "silent language" **in, specifically, Vico's terms**. In every case where meaning is constructed by the audience, where the point of view symbolically and often literally constitutes the meaning of a framed presentation, this silent language flows along the sagittal line connecting the viewer with the viewed. For example, in Paul Cézanne's large painting, *The Bathers* (*Les Grandes Baigneuses*, 1898–1905), meaning is not restricted to what appears inside the frame. The critical key is in the *distance taken from the scene*, the distance that allows the bathers to appear in *just* this array, at *just* this imaginary moment in time. The pleasure the bathers represent does not connect directly to the viewer. Rather, the isolation of the viewer from the group and the *distance* from their pleasure accentuates the alienation that could be imagined as an exclusion, loss, or missed opportunity. This distance undermines the *jouissance* of the bathers and constructs a second *jouissance* from lack, a *jouissance* that engages the death drive. A hermeneutic view of

the painting would ignore this dimension; a positivist view would assign it as a part of the material cause of the image. Neither would comprehend the way in which absence calls for a psychoanalytical understanding — an understanding grounded in the necessity of the death drive.

Dead of Night's ventriloquist's tale directly embodies the death drive. It resists a uniquely “clinical” interpretation, a hermeneutical view of symptoms, by transferring the contents of its representation to the act by which the audience is present within the representation. The ventriloquist desires to bring life to the dead puppet, $V > D$, so that audiences may enjoy the illusion that there are two performers rather than one on stage. But, the success of this desire is the puppet's autonomy, $V < D$, which contradicts the ventriloquist's position of control. Hugo's claim that he is intellectually superior to Frere is evidence of this reversal. Frere has, as we well know, authored this claim (he is the claim's “efficient cause”) but suppressed his role, making Hugo the final cause. Formal and material causes complete the death drive's Möbius-band like circuit, by offering up the automatism of the empty passageway, the place required for the puppet's material operation, as a sexual space that can be promised to a rival. This conversion returns us to the original act, the efficient cause, of Frere's death drive, where it operates as the Truth of the enthymeme and *matheme*, an “automaton” that sets Frere's symptoms in motion no matter what contingent circumstances arise. Because this automaton is suppressed, silent, “dead” — lost or missing in every possible sense — the Hysteric's machine works infallibly, ruthlessly, perpetually. It is the perfect mechanism because it never fails, in the presence of any contingencies, to produce the same “necessary” relationships.