

An Atlas of Virtuality: Mapping the “Horizontal” Political Unconscious of Architecture

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The Disinterest of the “Horizontal Order”

If anything, architectural representation is about the management of the invisible. The invisible includes what doesn't yet exist (i.e. a proposed building) except through partial views offered by the standard drawings and sketches or more elaborate digital simulations. It is also, in any graphic view, the space beyond the edge of the frame, and on the obverse of the picture plane used to construct the optics of the scene. It is what is present *in the virtuality of continuity*, through inferences made mentally or through unconscious neural additions or shortcuts, about what lies to the left or right, above or below, the frame; or what lies hidden behind the edges seen as a consequence of the static point of view.

The use of a frame, as Meyer Schapiro reminds us, is a convention.¹ That quadration serves to mark out, within a “viewing space,” another, represented space, remote in time and place, a “window to elsewhere,” is a remarkable cultural invention, to be sure; but can we also consider it as a radical *ideological* innovation? Is the virtuality called into being by the simple presence of a rectangular hole in space — paper or flat screen — something other than a convention extending the instrumental stance of technology?

The connections between ideology and representation are clearer in the case of the atlas, where a series of plan-view representations must be organized to accommodate curvature and to fit, using a limited range of graphic symbols, the variety of artifacts considered visible. The atlas does away with one aspect of virtuality by embracing it completely. The spaces outside the rectangular frame are accounted for in advance by the system of lines of longitude and latitude. Through this system, maps of the globe exist in advance of the time they are actually made. Once the system of reticular lines is in place, the rest is infill and choice of symbols. Such a style of zenithal representation could be said to “internalize” the virtuality of the continuous and, by this internalization, universalize it. All space is redefined as “waiting to be mapped” and connected up into an atlas; the thickness of objects viewed from above is compressed and converted into a symbolic value. There is however the lingering, pesky matter of curvature, which blights each map, no matter how local, with error.

Isn't this just a technical matter? Jan van den Berg has famously expounded this existential quandary in his book, *Things: Four Metabletic Reflections*.² But, we should additionally consider the critique recently brought forward by Stefano Boeri, who argues against the “arrogance of the zenith,” as an attitude of planners and the rules they impose on the landscape; an attitude that does not match up to reality:

[We see that] what has changed our territory has not been new districts, large buildings and infrastructures (roads, flyovers, rail tracks, tunnels), but rather a multitude of solitary and amassed buildings: detached houses, hangars, shopping centers, apartment blocks, garages and office complexes. A reduced range of manufactured objects incongruously thrown together, one against the other. Although they are modest constructions, they are at the same time concerned with distinguishing themselves from their surroundings. Scattered and heterogeneous groups of buildings that are expressions of small fragments of our society (the family, small industry, corporations, the shop, the club ...), intentionally isolated from public space and *disinterested* in its rules.³

[emphasis mine]

This condition of the landscape is highly optical, but in a pathological sense. Boeri has complained about both sides of this optics: (1) on one side, things are thrown together without any regard to the rules of “zenithal” planning; (2) on the other side, it is the arrogance of this view-from-above that has *allowed* the emergence of precisely the kind of space that must be seen, if at all, “from the ground,” where the indifference to the zenith is matched by an eclecticism of the subject and the means by which any observer must encounter and represent the landscape and its architecture — that is, horizontally.

Boeri cites the emerging “eclectic atlases” that have begun to address this problem. The arrogance of the zenith and the resulting *disinterest of the horizontal order* must be addressed with a new approach to the management of the virtual. Virtuality, in short, can no longer be limited to its dominant mode, the optically continuous, optimized in the idea of the zenithal atlas. “Virtual space,” which has used as its basis what can be optically recorded and coded, is normally conceived in the variety of spaces hidden by edges or excluded by the frame or picture plane. It can be added back, hypothetically, by moving the point of view around, “flying it through the site” to get to all sides and angles of the visible. But, the kind of virtuality suggested by Boeri’s concept of indifference *cannot* be viewed by any such elaborations. It is the virtuality that is implicit in the Thing itself, and in the “subjective objectivity” of the Thing that resists “optical” explication.

In short, I would connect two neglected forms of the virtual both (1) to the disinterest of the horizontal order to the zenithal project of mapping and planning and (2) to the “dimensionality of the political,” specifically, as *that which escapes the zenith*, just as the subject may discover the *means of escaping ideology*. The political is, in a fundamental sense, invisible *to* ideology and invisible *within* ideology. I adopt the “Althusserian style” of treating ideology through its primary mechanism of interpellation.⁴ The quick explanation of interpellation is that it is the effect, on multiple subjects on some city street, of the policeman’s shout, “Hey, you!” Though innocent of any crime, each subject imagines that the policeman is shouting to him/her. Each

has voluntarily anticipated the effect of ideology by inscribing its demands at the empty center of their now inside-out subjective topology, as an “inside frame.”

Interpellation can be shown as the primary ingredient of the “zenithal” point of view that generates atlases. It penetrates each subject “vertically,” which is to say from the position of a master controlling servants, sub-jects in a literal sense. Subjects, aware of being mapped, come to regard the space around them in terms of the instrumentality that the homogenization of the map instills. Space becomes territory. Time is assimilated to continuous spatial forms: lines, circles, spirals. Any point on the globe and any point in time becomes available, actually or symbolically, by means of a plenum defined geometrically and geopolitically. But, as Boeri, van den Berg, and many others have noted, there are gaps.

May we associate the limitations of the atlas — along with representational space in general — with the process of ideological interpretation and its “zenithal” powers? I would argue that we can and must do so — but that additionally we must also employ a more sophisticated knowledge of virtuality to open up the horizontality that, though invisible to the zenith, drives the “spaces of indifference” and their political potential. Like the unconscious of the individual, these spaces are “unconscious” with respect to representation. Their virtuality is not a matter of optical or technical corrections or additions. We cannot “fly through” this virtuality to get a full view of the hidden sides. We cannot continue to add maps side by side to finish off the atlas. We cannot launch missiles through the homogeneous space to hit targets because the virtuality of the horizontal is not continuous. It is not complete. It is not reliably Cartesian. Even its curvature, by which we might hope to correct the course of the missile or warp the fly-through demonstration, is broken — by temporality itself.

The Virtuality of Detachment

There are two main kinds of virtuality we need to add to the first, more obvious virtuality that happens inside continuous space-time. The first is the virtuality of detachment. This is an example of what Slavoj Žižek called, the “organ without a body,” the object/Thing that continues to survive even though its supporting context is missing. In folklore this theme is common: the shadow escapes its owner, or the soul escapes the dreamer. It encounters places and adventures unknown to the waking subject. The writer Filipe Alfau has invented the amusing situation of a character in a story who, while his author gets up to answer a knock at the door, escapes and takes the narrative into his own hands.⁵ The virtual of magical detachment is the basis for all theologies of the soul; but in psychoanalysis it is the basis of the “partial object.” Lacan’s list adds to Freud’s original (the breast, fæces, phallus), the voice (in particular the voice that cannot be located) and the gaze — the disembodied look that the object gives to the subject, not the Foucaultian “male gaze of power” that has agitated modern feminists. The partial or part-object survives as a kind of soul in purgatory, wandering according to a time-honored itinerary in a space best described as a Thesean labyrinth: a

space that “goes Nowhere” rather literally, by being a fractal meander constructed by three self-inscribed ABA turns.

The history of the virtual of detachment leaves no doubt: the partial object traverses the cultural space-time “between the two deaths,” the first death being the literal death of the subject, the second being the symbolic death required to “settle the soul” by locating within an eternal geometry of good *versus* evil. Law becomes spatial measure. Wandering between the two deaths, conflated to mortal experiences of travel, is clearly the only effective way of opening up the invisible horizontality, the “space inside space,” that Boeri cites as antithetical to the zenith view. In the writings of authors who have employed travel at an existential level — W. F. Sebald and Bruce Chatwin come readily to mind — philosophical *aporia* is encountered literally, as a resistance of sites and objects in them to normative perceptual penetration or social domestication. Paradox, anomaly, and negation come in the form of ruins, empty streets, wrong turns; or, in the case of Odysseus, Sirens, Lotus-eaters, and Cyclopes.⁶

The Virtuality of Attachment

Complementary to the virtuality to detachment is the virtuality of *attachment*, when an outside content is relocated to a radically central internal location. This has already been introduced with the idea of Althusserian interpellation. The interior of the interpellated subject is “emptied” by the command of the other and “obverted” into an exteriority, a space where the enigmatic desire of the Other creates an inside frame that permanently alienates the subject. This is a condition of “symbolic castration” — castration *by* symbols, as in the case of the jeweled crown that authenticates the king. If the king should lose the crown, his position is in jeopardy. The symbolic tail wags the dog.

Both the virtuality of detachment and attachment could be considered form of what Lacan called the extimate — the violation of rules of concentricity that order relations of inside and outside. In the virtuality of detachment, a part that is “interior” to a body or some context is set free to wander on its own. With the virtuality of attachment, a remote exterior appears suddenly and without mediation at the intimate kernel of subjectivity. In personal experience, this is the theme of the “contamination of reality by the dream or work of fiction.” The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges exploited this form extensively in stories, such as “Tlön, Uqbar, *Orbis Tertius*,” where a conspiracy to write an entirely fictional encyclopedia leaks out to the public, who begin to re-think reality in terms of its science-fictional inventions. A more pop-culture example would be the space-ship in Robert Wise’s 1951 film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which appears suddenly in the middle of the Mall in Washington, D. C. In detached virtuality, the geometry itself is “moral,” as in the example of the levels of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*; the lack of a mandate produces themes of wandering. In attached virtuality, however, the geometry is “normal” but the mandate is moral, central, and critical: earth must reform or be destroyed. This variation in the absence or presence of mandates echoes the relation of mandates to location in the interpellation of continuous virtuality. The mandate is the “voice,”

the geometry of space manages the gaze returned by the object to the subject. This explains how, in the widespread folkloric belief in the evil eye, the *justice* of retribution is related to the *indefinite* presence-absence of envy.

Contamination in the virtuality of attachment eclipses the subject; arriving from an indefinite external location, it constrains the subject's behavior as if a puppet-master were pulling strings from a distant concealed location. This is what creates, in Lacanian terms, the "barred subject" (§). The subject is constrained by an Other, even though the Other is "defective" and its mandates are both enigmatic and indecipherable. Were the eclipse of the subject by the Other complete, there would be no consciousness. However, Mladen Dolar argues that the interpellation process leaves a small remainder, a gap that holds open the possibility for the development of a "political dimension" affording an escape from ideology. Dolar connects this remainder with the phenomenon of "falling in love," because, like in the case of falling in love, there is a combination of a sense of destiny and the prerequisite of free choice. Nothing against love, but I would prefer to convert this combination into terms that permit a broader and less personalized exploration of the subject-after-interpellation. For destiny, I would like to substitute Aristotle's term for "natural accident-cause," *automaton*. As the variations of this word suggest, automaton can be both determinative/fatalistic and accidental/stochastic. For free choice, I would use Aristotle's companion term, *tuchē*, human choice/opportunism and environmental affordance. Where automaton seems to operate invisibly or "from above," affordance is more specifically a matter of "horizontal" adjacencies. It reintroduces the logic of continuous virtuality; it "looks around corners" and "goes a bit further." But, combining automaton and *tuchē* permits a more systematic investigation of the virtualities of detachment and attachment. The result is a comprehensive system that, within the general (Lacanian) framework of the evolution of the subject from ideological interpellation to the (psychoanalytical) subject that is the proper subject of the political — i.e. the subject of properly civic architecture — is able to close the circle of relationships linking subjectivity with representation (the kinds of virtualities), attitudes toward space-time and the relation of architecture to both "zenithal" and "horizontal" stances and strategies, and the alignment of architecture's political unconscious with the horizontality that acts as a "space inside space," countering its zenithal and interpellative mandates.⁷

Time Travel

Along with the themes of the "story within the story," the double, and contamination of reality by the dream, time travel is one of the four types of fantasy that Jorge Luis Borges regarded as a definitive and structurally complete set. Fantasy in literature is not the same as fantasy in psychoanalysis, but a comparison is useful. In literature, fantasy displaces the folkloric and traditional practices of magic and ritual; it is in a sense the modern residence of the uncanny. And, because this new residence is in a neighborhood of scientific naturalism, fantasy is, as Tvetan Todorov argued, put forward as the exception to scientific thinking that, rather than

offering an alternative mode of conceptualization or supernatural cosmography, endorses the instrumentalist norm.⁸ The double, which challenges the singularist idea of identity put forward by ego psychology, and the contamination of reality by the dream intersect two main Freudian projects, the uncanny and dream analysis. The other component of the Freudian uncanny, optics, has to do with scale inversions, such as the container-contained reversal of the story-in-the-story as well as the contamination of reality by the dream, where the dream literally “dreams the dreamer.”

The uncanny as well as the four Borgesian themes of the fantastic could be summarized by the Lacanian idea of *extimacy*, the paradoxical exchanges between remote exterior and deepest interior. The idea of the “intimate exterior” is, in fact, precisely the zone where the space of horizontality is inserted into the “zenithal space” of contiguous mapping and continuous virtuality. Extimacy, furthermore, involves the two alternative virtualities, detached and attached, as we find it in ethnographic, literary, filmic, architectural, and visual arts forms.

Travel through time seems to be the most “positivist” of the four themes, because it requires a rigidly linear idea of time in order to work. The paradox of time travel — that the time traveler will be able to alter circumstances that preceded the decision to make the trip to the past and, hence, potentially cancel their existence (as in the film *The Terminator*) — requires strict adherence to the rules of logic in order to be, through the negation of that logic, of any dramatic value. Yet, what might happen if, instead of the rules of non-contradiction we allowed for a kind of Peircean “abduction” — the reduction of what seems at first to be fantastic by the discovery of circumstances that render it “entirely understandable”? What if the phenomenon of *anachronism* was not only understandable, but *normal* and, furthermore, *essential* to, in particular, *critical paradigmatic states in the evolution of architecture*?

The fantastic moves us beyond the kind of socio-cultural reality in which ideology operates invisibly, through its own “fantastic” topology of interpellation. Ideology is unnoticed; it operates as a norm. That is why ideology is ideology: it is presumed universally and regarded as unquestionable. Only, Mladen Dolar’s notion that interpellation leaves a small remainder coincides precisely with ideology’s status as invisible fantasy. It is worthwhile to repeat his exact words at this point:

To put it in the simplest way, a part of the individual resists appropriation by ideology, an element of “pre-ideological” and “presubjective” *materia prima* that comes to haunt the ideological subject. A part of external materiality remains that cannot be successfully integrated into the interior. Interpellation is based on the idea of a happy transition from a pre-ideological state into ideology: successfully achieved, it wipes out the traces of its origin and results in a belief in the autonomy and self-transparency of the subject. The subject is experienced as a *causa sui* — in itself an inescapable illusion once the operation is completed. The psychoanalytic point of departure is the remainder produced by the operation; psychoanalysis does not deny the cut, it only

adds a remainder. The clean cut is always unclean; it cannot produce the flawless interiority of an autonomous subject. The psychoanalytic subject is coextensive with that very flaw in the interior.⁹

The “flaw in the interior” of the subject, the kernel left over by interpellation, is the element within “life” that is “death.” And, following the mirror logic by which folk and poetic traditions see each “right hand version” accompanied by an equal and opposite “left hand version,” this flaw is simultaneously a small element of “life” within the dead subject who, through a momentum that pushes past literal death into a zone of “between the two deaths,” constitutes the dynamic of the “partial object,” the “organ without a body,” the model of the Freudian enigmatic-resistant Thing (*Das Ding*).

Thus, this “flaw in the interior” of the subject interpellated by ideology produces not only a remainder that yields both kinds of “alternative” virtuality, detached and attached; but it also leads directly to the two forms of the uncanny defined by Ernst Jentsch, whose 1906 essay inspired Freud to write his treatise on the same subject.¹⁰ Both types display the logic of Lacanian extimacy, through a double inscription that treats life and death as container and contained, in two principal positions: (1) the inscription of life inside death, the survival of the subject past the moment of literal death, the wandering in a space charged with mandates; and (2) the inscription of death inside life, the automation of the subject “eclipsed” by a dæmonic unseen force, an automation of freely chosen actions that converges on a predetermined fate. The challenge Stefano Boeri presented at the beginning of this essay, to find an alternative way of describing the “horizontal” space-inside-space invisible and resistant to zenithal arrogance (= ideology) has turned out to already-always had a solution in the universal human category of the uncanny. The uncanny’s two modalities, which we might abbreviate as A_D and D_A to show their double inscription of life and death, in turn engage two types of virtuality that “supplement” the main type of virtuality associated with continuity and the exercise of zenithal authority. With detached virtuality comes the “coincidental” cultural practices of the soul between the two deaths, D_A , as well as the more general case of the uncanny Thing in lived space, which resists representation and conceptualization. With attached virtuality we reveal the topological secret of interpellation itself, but now in a way that makes the mandate, and its extreme exteriority, evident. Like Klaatu, the messenger from outer space in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the message — the mandate — is identical with the medium. The power of extimacy is *that it has happened*, that its structure exists. That is the message. In A_D , we have been “automated” all along. What we took to be our freely made choices, *tuchē*, we were only adding fuel to the fire of fate.

1 Meyer Schapiro, “On some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs,” *Semiotica* 1, 3 (1969): 223–242, reprinted in *Theory and Philosophy of*

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- Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 1–32.
- 2 Jan Hendrick van den Berg, *Things; Four Metabletic Reflections* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1970).
 - 3 Stefano Boeri, "Eclectic Atlases," in *The Cybercities Reader*, ed. Stephen Graham (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 117–122.
 - 4 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York : Monthly Review Press, 2001).
 - 5 Filipe Alfau, *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart Inc., 1936).
 - 6 Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., makes the claim that such "naïve" sources as Homer's *Odyssey* reveal a sophisticated philosophical program within the travel paradigms encountered by the wandering hero. "Categories of Travel," in *Categories: A Colloquium* (University Park, PA: Department of Philosophy, Penn State University, 1978), pp. 103–120.
 - 7 The question is, why has not architectural theory not yet come up with a comprehensive framework allowing the connection, on one side, with the anthropological practices of settlement and, on the other side, detached/clinical theories of subjectivity, including psychoanalysis? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the nature of the "linguistic turn" taken by theory at a time when semiotics in other fields was provoking discourse about the role of signs. Architecture theorists preferred overwhelmingly to follow the lead of the planner Kevin Lynch in attributing to the image a positivist stimulus-response logic; with the outside as "objective" and subjectivity confined to a dark interior, there could only be questions about the "mediations" of perception and cognition. In one form or another, such questions kept the positivist paradigm alive, even in humanist garb.
 - 8 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973).
 - 9 Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 75–96.
 - 10 Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8, 22 (August 26, 1906): 195–198 and 8, 23 (September 1, 1906): 203–205.