

Text for 'Understanding the Void'

The diagrams tell a story-in-a-story in this seminar on Phantasy Logic. The reversal of Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' as a Venn diagram into an Euler circle diagram plays out through the positions of the 'passage à l'acte' and 'acting out' to converge on the forced choice. This ultimately leads to a theory of how two virtualities combine as a template for architecture's foundation rituals. [Watch the video at <https://youtu.be/32hluG4QGV0>]

1. Reading Seminar XIV is a difficult matter, but Lacan's illustrations are essential to the task. Through them we see the return of themes of previous seminars and foreshadowing of ideas he will develop later. From the beginning, Lacan posed his thought as a response and conversion, or rather IN-version, of Descartes' famous dictum, cogito ergo sum, "I think therefore I am." Lacan thought that Descartes was overly optimistic, and that if being and thinking coincided positively, as suggested by the Venn diagram of this statement, the subject would never have an unconscious, or be capable of evil. When Lacan used Euler circles to produce his alternative, he meant to find a way to represent the void. This is key to any architectural understanding of psychoanalysis, since it requires us to imagine that there are two kind of virtuality, on related to the social life of the Symbolic, and another that was the Real of effectiveness. This video uses Lacan's diagrams in Lesson 12 to show how his development of the cogito of Descartes, turned inside out, would explain the options of the human psyche as a forced choice relation to the Symbolic that could only be resolved in the negation of negation offered by the Real.
2. This graphical demonstration grew out of a problematic passage in session 12 of Lacan's Seminar XIV. The problem comes from the position of the Other as something the subject is eliminating him or herself FROM, while at the same time it seems that it is the Other that is being eliminated, as in the famous barred A that appears in Lacan's graph of desire. This double possibility is actually taken into Lacan's use of Euler circles to construct a 'toroid' model of alienation, one that is better, in my mind, than the simple dichotomy of linguistics, which simply separates metonymy, the forward motion of speech, from metaphor, the independent process of substitution.
3. Bruce Fink's famous book, *The Lacanian Subject*, has some very helpful things to say about the way Lacan uses Euler circles that can represent a void intersection. Although he does not mention Euler circles' difference from Venn circles, and in fact seems to think that these

circles are the same as Venn diagrams, he does make it possible to connect the logical square or rather rectangle Lacan uses to explain how alienation develops a psychotic flight from the Other and, simultaneously, a neurotic acting out that addresses the Other with nonsense signifiers, such as used by the Rat Man to insult his father by calling him a lamp, a towel, a plate. This kind of language nonsense involves a 'pure signifierness' that is the *Vorstellungs Repräsentanz* that Freud said was the nature of ALL signification of the Unconscious, the form of the signifier that enabled it to cross the boundary between consciousness and the unconscious.

4. You will notice that the logical square is actually a sequence of motions that come out of the reversed cogito. By expanding the original reversed cogito to the *passage à l'acte* to the left at the 2 position and then to the diagram for 'acting out' at position 3, Lacan can then recombine the *passage à l'acte* and acting out in the dynamic condition of the forced choice, where symbolic castration must take place in temporal alternation or, as we can demonstrate, in a kind of drawing where two virtualities are created simultaneously.
5. To take a step back, Fink notes that the problem with Descartes' "I think therefore I am," is that the subject has to keep saying this in order to enjoy the feeling that she exists. Having to say it introduces doubt that it's actually true, and as soon as the subject stops saying it, his conviction evaporates. "I think therefore I am" is, for Lacan, more of a utopian ideal than a statement of an obvious fact. His alternative is to see the intersection not as the union that Descartes proposed, but as a void.
6. This is why Lacan emphasizes the use of Euler circles over a Venn diagram. The Euler circle cannot represent what we can't experience in ordinary life, so when it tries to cover the space where two things cannot possibly connect, it must specify this space to be a void.
7. It is out of this void that the subject faces two alternative situations. It can exit from the Symbolic entirely in a moment of psychotic flight, when it becomes a pure object. This is called the 'passage à l'acte', when the subject loses subjectivity through its possession of the name of the father. It is in the zone of the Real.
8. The alternative is called 'acting out'. Fink explains that this allows the subject to remain in the scene of the Symbolic, by alienating the unconscious, but this comes at the cost of identifying the void as the place where the subject must return, to become the IT or 'Es' in German, where it has access only to signifiers that refer only to themselves. The speech of the subject

who is acting out is limited to nonsense, just as the Rat Man was able to insult his father only by calling him a lamp, a towel, a plate. This is pure signifierness, allowing the subject access to the Unconscious only at the cost of descending into incomprehensibility, which nonetheless gives him a pleasure called *jouissance*.

9. The passage à l'acte and acting out expand the original reversed cogito void, in the same way that the torus at first expands itself with a spiral motion that is the repetition of demand. In what is called the 'reference polygon', the torus moves out from a point in the same way a traveler might move across a sphere, but the difference is that the subject as a traveler must move in two ways at the same time, thanks to what Lacan calls the 'natural division of linguistics' between metaphor and metonymy. This means that the subject going around a subject world is actually going around a void, which means that this expansion will be followed by a contraction.
10. When contraction happens, it introduces the situation of the forced choice, where we have the appearance of alternation while in fact each motion in one direction is *simultaneously* a motion in another direction. This is the issue of alienation, namely that it involves a castration where we obey a rule to be allowed into the Symbolic but that rule simultaneously alienates us FROM the symbolic.
11. Earlier in Seminar XIV we were taught about symmetrical difference, which is defined as an intersection without union. This explains how the reverse cartesian circles create a void between speaking and being, which require us to convert to non-speaking, or nonsense, and non-being, which is psychosis.
12. [blank]
13. The story might end here, but we have to ask how the temporality of the forced choice actually works. Does it involve the temporal dynamics of the flight from the Symbolic or the temporal stasis of the subject caught in the presence of the Other, the paternal signifier, forced to babble nonsense?
14. We have to conceive this problem in terms of the way the void compels us to re-draw the circles that have formed it. Although these circles don't enclose any literal spatial zones, they define two kinds of virtualities, one to deal with separation of the passage à l'acte, another to deal with an impossible over-presence within the Symbolic. One must deal with the issue of

effectiveness without having the Symbolic to create relationships, the other with how to create a protective distance between the subject and its over-proximate relations.

15. There are two possibilities, or possibly two aspects of the same solution. One relates to an ancient idea of architectural detailing, the creation of a joint, or 'harmoniē', the connection of different elements or materials. Harmoniē in terms of human actions can be done by alternating between two opposed forces, just as a tree must bend to avoid being broken by the wind. This palintropic harmoniē is the battleground analogy, where two armies are contending for the same ground.
16. The alternative is palintonos harmoniē, which is required for a building to stabilize its structure by constructing solid joints that do not move, or rather which neutralize movement, which is called idempotency, a buffering effect. This means that change will not damage the stability of the system, what Freud sought to define in his idea of the homeostasis involving both a pleasure principle and a death drive, with the aim the neural circuits to be able to return to a Nirvana of low-energy circulation. Here, the two aspects of the void use two kinds of virtuality, one that constructs a Euclidean-style perspective where distance is constructed and infinity is held at infinite distance, and another where the two virtualities are drawn at the same time. This is a projective virtuality that equates the vanishing point with the point of view and collapses distance into finite surfaces that, although they lack any boundaries, are infinitely curving, like a Möbius band, cross-cap, or Klein bottle. The palintonic model of harmony means that there must be a cut or difference that is 'primally present' as a result of the void between speaking and being. This cut is the void, and through the cut, the void becomes portable and transformative. It can go out at the same time it goes in, up at the same time it goes down. In short, it is the contronymic level of language that Freud found in the contronyms of ancient languages, where single words would mean two opposite things. *Hostes* meant both hospitable and hostile. *Altuus* meant both high and low. *Sacer* meant both reviled and worshiped.
17. Here, at the foundational position of language, we also have the foundational rules of architecture, where to secure a building and create shelter, it is necessary to immobilize and desiccate a sacrificial victim. Why? Because "she" is always defined as one who would run away and speak nonsense. The orthography or raising of the building required a literal suppression of a living victim. The life of the former depended on the contronymic death of the Other, who became the logical priority for the building that was perceived and used only after this moment of consecration.