

The Necessary Failure of Precedent



The indicative gesture is, as Cassirer has written, an attenuated grasp, substituting a spatial vector for the lost possession of some object in the distance. The aggressive index finger fires off a ballistic line, while its companion fingers hide their faces in passive complicity.

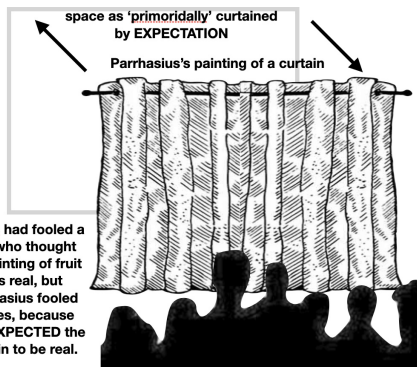
The problem with precedent's implicit pointing gesture is that *what* is being pointed *at*, what is being framed, is indefinite, thanks to the physical and existential distance separating the pointing frame's aim and its target. For architecture teaching, this distance is problematic. Photos, drawings, and even in-person visits are distanced *at the same time* they are presented as definitive. With the proposed 'solution' a new problem is created. The precedent devolves into a forced choice between free discovery and following instructions of the ambiguous frame. Is precedent therefore useless? I argue that the *structure* of failure makes precedent not just successful but essential.

When mirrors divide space, they make us realize that space had always been split by an internal parallax, as if 'waiting for a mirror to happen'. The mirror simply reveals the nature of this parallax.¹ When Lewis Carroll's Alice passes through the looking glass, she exits reality from one line but enters Wonderland along another, just as driving from Utah into Nevada involves two distinct motions. A seemingly smooth passage runs parallel to an emergent religious 'solution' to what is suddenly realized, retroactively, as being a prior religious 'problem'. Even the billboards recognize the truth of parallax!

Alice's 'left-handed' Wonderland springs forth suddenly from the other side of the mirror but retroactively marks the left-behind normal space as having 'always' been right-handed, but with a left-handed latent content.² The liminal cut/passage comes first in experience but reveals a *prior* logical

condition. This idea is quite ancient. In the fabled contest of Greek painters, Zeuxis presented a conventional fake (painting of a bowl of fruit) while Parrhasius made a fake of a fake — the curtain the judges mistakenly took to be covering his 'real painting'. Parrhasius's precedent is something we can't point at, since it defines the role of latency and parallax. The 'failure' of the painted curtain (which succeeded as a trick) was Parrhasius's success of pointing at pointing.

Zeuxis had fooled a bird who thought his painting of fruit was real, but Parrhasius fooled judges, because they EXPECTED the curtain to be real.



Parrhasius painted a curtain that the judges took to be real, trumping Zeuxis' contest entry of a *trompe-l'œil* bowl of fruit.



Welcome billboard to Utah, from Nevada, acknowledging (naively?) that the boundary retroactively confers debasement at the same time it claims elevation: the katagraphic indication of parallax.

¹ As a reference, my ideas of parallax come from Kojin Karatani (*Transcritique*), Slavoj Žižek (*The Parallax View*), Jean Nicod (*Foundations of Geometry and Induction*), and Samuel Edgerton (*Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*) but are developed through Jorge Luis Borges' concept of four forms of fictional liminality.

² Latency corresponds to an 'unconscious' that can be attributed to both a subject and object.