Coda, Perfect Shadow

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In the film *CODA* (2021) the musical idea of coda connects to another one, the acronym CoDA, meaning "Child of Deaf Adults." A young woman grows up as the only hearing member of a hearing-disabled family. A born singer, she wants to study music, but her fisherman father and brother need her on their boat. Resisting, she studies hard for admission to Berklee College of Music, but at her audition she seems to falter. Then she sees her family sneak into the auditorium balcony. She starts signing her lyrics in ASL and performs even more movingly, a *CODA*'s coda.

My take on the presentations in this collection dealing with *Hiding in Architecture*, is also about things heard and not heard, so I propose bringing the film *CODA*'s musical and dramatic codas to a third coda, a theoretical coda. During the live conference, I found myself waiting to hear some things. In particular, I expected (1) the topic of anamorphosis — a clear case of spatial hiding — to come up and even be tiresomely overworked. I also waited to hear about (2) literature's most famous case of hiding, Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Purloined Letter," but actually there was … silence. Possibly these obvious headliners were present in small print, but I found it ironic that, in a conference on hiding, these paradigm–exemplars of hiding seemed to be themselves hidden.

This derives from the fact that both anamorphosis and the purloined letter case are forms of latency — what we hear without hearing or see without seeing. By latency I mean a second kind of virtuality — not the "virtual reality" where one object hides whatever lies behind it but a "reality of the virtual," where things are neither present or absent, visible or invisible, dead or alive — a kind of Schrödinger Cat virtuality.[1] But, this is a virtuality of effectiveness. It is critical to the way things in virtual reality come to seem to be what we take them for. Latency is temporally delayed and spatially sideways. It "waits for the right moment." When Jacques Lacan asked "what was anamorphosis before it was anamorphosis" (the murals at the Minims Monastery and Holbein's memento mori skull, both appearing in the 16c.), the answer had to do with latency being the principal ingredient of the uncanny, where this second virtuality permeated rituals, folklore, beliefs about the cosmos.[2]

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[1] This is not an original idea. Watch Slavoj Žižek, *The Reality of the Virtual* [DVD video], (dir.) Ben Wright (Illinois: Olive Films, 2012). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnTQhIRcrno. Žižek explains how wha we call "virtual reality" (computer animations, video games, etc.) has a *productive agency* ("reality of the virtual") made possible by projective geometry conditions — the formations combining self-intersection (folded space) with non-orientation (twists).

[2] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar VII [1959–1960], (trans.) Dennis Porter (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 135–140 ff. See also Mladen Dolar, "Anamorphosis," *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015): 125-140. Dolar argues that the topic of anamorphosis maps across the entire domain of (Lacanian–Freudian) psychoanalysis, meaning that this "architectural" topic acts, itself, as an interpretive supplement. Lacan implies as much when he tells the story of Apollo and Daphne in terms of the contronymic love–hate effect of Eros's vengeful double-vectored arrow, shot to induce a chase (*dæmon*) and a corresponding flight (*askesis*), confining these agencies within a topology of no escape. Given that architecture presents itself as, primarily, shelter from threats and discomforts, there is even more justification for considering architecture and psychoanalysis to be theoretically bonded.

Since the German word for the uncanny, *Die Unheimlich* — the un-homey — obliges architects to take it seriously, latency in all its forms is inextricably connected to the central questions about building.[3] Architectural containment, for example, presents latency in its ambiguity between being a prison or refuge, alternative symptoms of the fear of premature burial.[4] Latency is a packaging device, allowing such symptoms to be gift-wrapped and delivered to the site in question. Poe's purloined letter is thus a case of the un-dead, in limbo between visibility and invisibility, theft and recovery. Holbein's anamorphic skull warns the living person that they will soon be — or perhaps already are — dead.

Latency is elusive and abstract but felt materially. The police in Poe's mystery story construct latency by frantically searching for the missing letter, never thinking how they are searching for *something hidden* but of course it's left out in the open. The un-dead viewers of Holbein's anamorphic skull *are suddenly surprised* by the blur that suddenly pops into view, reminding them about death while they *kneel* beneath a cross at the position of Golgotha, completing a geometric puzzle involving three's and nine's.[5]

Figure 1. Giambattista Vico, title page engraving, *The New Science* (1744), an image known as "the Impresa" (emblematic device). Metafisica, with winged temples denoting divine wisdom, sits on a celestial globe (i. e. above the Euclidean world), leaning against a plinth (altar?) inscribed with the motto, IGNOTA LATEBAT ("She lay hidden"). Metaphysics, Vico is claiming, lies within a "superior virtuality" that projects its forms *via* a mirror that reverses left and right ("chirality") but not top and bottom. Thus the mirror is not, as is often assumed, a reflection but rather a *cut*. Initially the cut is not between the subject and object of looking but within the look itself.

The Inside Cut

Latency involves doubles. The purloined letter is invisible because it *looks like an ordinary letter*, which in fact it is. How did something *looking like itself* become such an effective means of concealment? Groucho Marx (Captain Spaulding) in *Animal Crackers* (1930), is introduced to the musician-for-hire, Emanuel Ravelli (Chico). Spaulding says "You remind me of Emanuel Ravelli," and Chico says that he in fact *is* Emanuel Ravelli. Nonplussed, Spaulding replies that it's not surprising, then, "that the two of them look alike." Poe explains his vanishing trick is also based on there being really *two* things that look alike. One (imaginary) letter is for the police who are super-enthusiastic about tearing apart the Minister D—'s apartment. The other (actual) letter is invisible to the police because it "looks like itself." In

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[3] Sigmund Freud, (1919), *The 'Uncanny'*. (trans.) Alix Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 17: 217–256.

[4] In premature burial, latency is literally the confinement of something that is not yet dead, the paradigm of the haunted house. Graveside rituals could be said to be based on the belief that internment is not the last word. What is hidden is not just a body but a belief in the *incontinence* of death, a future "return of the Real," the emergence of the structural key out of the secondary effects of any causal sequence. Žižek relates this emerging latency of the Real to the architectural spandrel. See Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

[5] John North, *The Ambassadors' Secret: Holbein and the World of the Renaissance* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2002). North has only to turn the painting over to find its "secret": the over-precise date of *vernissage* (April 11, 1533, 4 p.m.) specified the angle of the sun (27º) at 4 p.m. on Good Friday, the precise time Luca Paccioli and others predicted as the Apocalypse, over-determined by the numbers 3 and 9. On the *recto*, 27º angles link the horizon, the angle of the anamorphic skull, and the viewer's position beneath the half-hidden cross at the upper left corner.

other words, *something is latent when it resists discovery by those who do not take themselves into account as a part of the concealment process* (a form of hysterical blindness).

Holbein's superbly detailed double portrait, looks like itself, with the exception of the slanted blur muddying the feet of the well-dressed subjects. The blur neither lies on the floor nor floats in the air. It is a vector in the space of the viewer, which it must humiliate by the angle of view it requires. It is the viewer who is un-dead, not the image. Holbein over-specified the date of the painting's completion (April 11, 1533, *4 p.m.*), as the predicted time of the Apocalypse, making the viewer's genuflection just before the end a literal latency (L. *lato, latere*, "to lie hidden") a momentary reprieve from universal death.[6]

Mimesis is why the two Ravelli's are, in effect, "self-concealing." This is not they way something imitates another, but the more radical disconnect of one's own being with appearing. A letter can be invisible if it "doesn't look like itself." A warning of impending world destruction can be invisible if it tricks the viewer to step into an alternative space just to see a skull and ends up in a thin sandwich between death and life. Emanuel Ravelli is really a double in a radical sense: the one who's a double and the one who isn't; the Ravelli who is disturbed by Groucho's joke and the one who resists. Latency, the uncanny of the uncanny, is mimesis in a nutshell. In order to look like yourself, you have to not look like yourself to begin with.

What if: architecture is possible because the building, in wanting to look like something, has first to not look like itself? How would this involve the issue of uncanny latency and the function of hiding as primordial? This may be a variation on Alice (in Wonderland)'s complaint, about seeing a cat without a smile but never a smile without a cat. This is what happens when architecture, like the uncanny anamorphic examples of the blurred skull or purloined letter, pulls the viewer into the viewed. Something happens that requires a split, but when time comes to make the split, it finds that there is an older, an ancient fracture, already there.

The *archē* of architecture is either the Tower of Babel or the Thesean Labyrinth. Both are spiral-like, both are about the confusion of inside and outside, both are "inside cuts." The Labyrinth connects by disconnecting (no doors), Babel disconnects in the act of connecting (no top). Babel was built by those whose word controlled things in a 1:1 fashion ("bi-univocal concordance," Adamic speech). Without the split proper to human (post-Babel) language, "you could do anything," a talent that God wished to reserve for Himself. Adamic speech had a split, but it was reified, *built in*. It was a *gradus ad Parnassum*, a big stair connecting earth to heaven, hence the top problem. The account in Genesis is as ambiguous as the famous paintings that followed. Was the top destroyed? Unfinished? Or, just hidden?

A similar set of questions circulate around the Thesean Labyrinth, which is a meander (not a maze) without a door that nonetheless promises continence (as a prison design). What's the trick? How does latency manage this one? Latency, the product all acts of concealment, is not just present from the early beginnings of architecture, it's architecture's essence. No latency, no architecture. We find it easy to talk about latency as an effect, in buildings that are camouflaged, buildings with hidden rooms and passageways, buildings pulled away from public view, etc., but it is very difficult to talk about hiddenness as intrinsic, even when hiddenness is primary, the *archē* of every building. The question of latency is tough

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[6] Giambattista Vico graphically credits latency as foundational in his *New Science*, with the image known as the *impressa* on the title page of the 1744 (third) edition. See Donald Phillip Verene, Vico's *'Ignota Latebat'*," *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987): 79–98.

enough when, as in the case of Babel, the building looks *like* something (the Babylonian ziggurat, for example), but what about a building that doesn't look like anything?

This is the Thesean labyrinth, designed by Western literature's first architect, Dædalus. Like Babel, it is a cut, a pure cut. There's no pretense of having an inside contained by an outside. One wall curves about in three distinctive foldings. What can it conceal? As a jail without a door, it would seem to be the model of incontinence. Radically, concealment is latent. The Thesean labyrinth is latency at its purest!
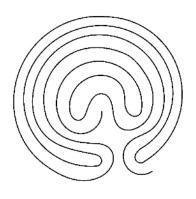

Figure 1. Thesean Labyrinth, shown as a passageway. The seven "upper layers" are counted twice (for both going in and coming out), so that Borges characterized the number 14 (2x7) as infinity. Drawing by author.

The Argentine master of the short-story, Jorge Luis Borges, gives away the secret of this self-securing latency in his story, "House of Asterion."[7] Borges gives the number of passages not what is obvious from the plan, seven, but fourteen. In counting each of the layers twice, he substitutes, for the physical space, the act of moving in and out. The single passage combines and blurs the difference of these, making the three-fold plan the perfect trap. This design has been found graffitied into walls across the Mediterranean. Possibly, it was a game to see how fast one could remember and reproduce the design.[8]

Even if we discount the Thesean Labyrinth as fiction, we cannot deny its effectiveness in producing precisely those feelings of doubt, shame, guilt, or even fear that were ingredients of King Minos's prison for the hybrid man-bull. By stinting Poseidon his proper sacrifice, Minos *ought to have been ashamed*, so Poseidon made sure, shaming the king by inflaming his wife Pasiphaë with passion for a bull, requiring Dædalus to cover the shameful product of this lust with a shameful design.

Remarkably, thousands of years after the Labyrinth at Knossos had crumbled to dust, the shame of the *form* persists whenever the pattern is reproduced. I learned this lesson personally, when I trod the turf maze on St. Catherine's Hill outside of Winchester one summer day. One begins the trod skeptically, doubting that any magic could last 2500 years. After a couple of rounds, one pauses, long enough for a little doubt to leak in — am I really going in or out? Then comes the fright: which way was I moving before I paused? This sequence need happen only once, but it happens again and again. The Labyrinth is an architecture of *pure virtual effectiveness. It is a shame machine.* The original shame of Minos can be felt afresh, simply by treading out the design. The plan as not a drawing but rather a building, a Not-Building.

With evidence such as this, and a demonstrated antiquity that connects the modern skeptical tourist to the first maze-trodders, does this *archē* not count as evidence that architecture is *primarily* concealment? Yes, as the clever presentations of this conference demonstrated so clearly, buildings can be disguised, they can be put out of site, they can be costumed. They can be hidden, seldom visited, out of reach. These are architecture's menu of excitement, intrigue, cleverness, and virtuoso effects. But, where concealment is the

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[7] Jorge Luis Borges, "The House of Asterion," in (eds.) Emir Rodríguez Monegal, and Alastair Reid, B*orges, a Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Dutton, 1981).

[8] J. F. Jackson Knight, in his *Cumæan Gates* (1936) argued that this design was given as a test to the soul of the newly-deceased. So, the labyrinth literally corresponds to the situation of Holbein's viewer, forced to kneel before the anamorphic skull, but given "only half of the information."

central issue, theory must address latency as its central concern. I would argue that if architecture theory does nothing else, it must give an account of latency.

If theory were to made any advance into concealment, it would go further into geometry, past the perspectival/Euclidean display of what is evident to cases of virtuality that would take anamorphosis as an exemplar and logical guide. Echoing Lacan's question of what anamorphosis must have been before it was anamorphosis, we must ask what was architecture before it was architecture. I think the Labyrinth and Babel, the Purloined Letter and *The Ambassadors*, make the answer obvious, but it seems quite unexpected: shame.

Coda, Perfect Shadow

We are children of deaf parents. Our parents cannot hear what we are saying (they are dead), but they still make signs to us, out of the past. They still have something to teach. We stand in their shadow, but we have the job of filling their void. Everything eclipsed at the point where the visual line passes across the profile edge creates a prismatic void into which we must learn to expand (*paideia*), so that the prism will be freely filled by theory. This theory does not have to know everything. In fact it has to know "nothing" in the sense that theory, to account for both the visible and the invisible, must be a kind of *kenosis*, knowing what we "know already" but have forgotten we know. In this sense, Plato was right to remind us that even imagination is a kind of memory (*anamnesis*).

Theory as speculation moves past obvious examples to predict examples that are not at all obvious. In the case of the uncanny, we could develop an idea of a "second virtuality" working within and beyond the virtuality of everyday perception and representation. The second virtuality is latent within the first. It requires Babel to be built in order to be destroyed. Architecture is the dark matter of building.

This is captured humorously in the Marx Brothers' routine of the mirror scene in *Duck Soup*, where Harpo, dressed in a night-gown identical to Groucho's, plays the part of Groucho's reflection to conceal the fact that the mirror has been broken. Harpo is true to all invisibilities lying beyond the edge of our known world. Groucho takes a spin but Harpo has no time to execute a duplicate, but he is able to "show up" for the finish and convince Groucho that this maneuver has been duplicated. As Slavoj Žižek has joked, quantum physics has made the same comparison about the universe lying beyond its technical and theoretical measure. It is as if God has designed a virtual reality game but doesn't want to waste money on programming all of the scenery that the player won't ever reach, so leaves it unfinished. When a player (a quantum physicist) accidentally ventures beyond the fringe of mathematical order and normal causality, he/she gets a topsy-turvy world! When non-physicists stumble onto Perfect Shadow we call it epiphany.

In the secondary virtuality of the perfect shadow, there would be radically imperfect buildings, but a perfect architecture, suggesting a zero-sum relationship between the two. Indeed, when the anthropologist Eric Erikson was shown a random-looking group of stones and told by his Yurok informant that "this was where the universe was born," we have to admit that it doesn't take a lot of building to make a perfect architecture, one that is almost all shadow, a perfect shadow, perfect concealment.