

Tim Noble and Sue Webster, *A Hole* (2005).

The Complexity of the Figure–Ground Distinction

The seeming simplicity of dividing a figure from a ground in each act of perception involves more than the introductory art class exercise. Bounding a figure to create a profile attributes values of CONATUS (will, initiative, independence, etc.) that fuse notion with motion, while the properties of the ground are given the liberties of incontinence (that the frame can only pretend to limit). This short essay aims to establish the useful terms defining this elemental division so that more complicated ideas can be brought to bear.

It seems simple enough. You look out at a scene and see things. The things that draw your attention are generally some combination of the following: (1) compact, (2) “object-like,” (3) autonomous, not in need of your attention to exist, (4) mobile, at least some of the time, (5) valued positively as attractive or negative as unimportant or even threatening, (6) possibly in danger of being stolen or destroyed. They are objects, and some of them are people, animals, bugs, gadgets, and the like. Their common attribute is that they come and they go, in comparison to a “ground” that is, relatively, more stable and less changing. The ground does not attract our attention as much as the comparatively more volatile object. We shove the ground back at the same time we pull the object forward, the better to inspect it. The space *through which* we do all this shoving back and pulling forward is what we call depth, which retains the qualities of the desires and fears that attend these push-pull efforts.

These enumerated distinctions would seem to be enough to justify moving on to more complicated issues, such as how to describe the objects, how to represent them graphically or literarily, how to define them in terms of the laws of physics: biology, mechanics, dynamics, geometry, etc. This involves manipulation of the frames that produce variations on the theme of the ground. As Hal Foster said,

quoting Willem de Kooning, “perspective was invented ... so that painters could depict dead bodies.”¹ A figure can be dead or alive, the ground as such enjoys eternal life, although it can turn brown around the edges. The ground is the place where we do our systems thinking, about “environmental relations,” denigration, seasonal change, generic dangers, promises, wealth, misery, beauty — in short, the ground is, poetically, the landscape, as the origins of this term as a Dutch word for the background of a painting suggests.



Kara Walker, *Keys to the Coop*. Walker’s art shows how the silhouette is both a condensation and epitome, a character-ization that can condense political situations because it forced the viewer into the position of a voyeur who traps a moment of revealed truth. The profile essentially creates an idiomatic and orthographic surface, or surface that traps its own shadow, presenting itself as an absence.

The figure is something we relate spatially to a profile that attempts to capture it in silhouette. If we can draw a line around it, it is not only a figure but a figure with a relation to us as viewers, since the silhouette is a profile that creates a face in response to our view, a view from a *point* where our parallax involves not just our perception of depth and ability to distinguish between a 2-d and 3-d figure, but our ability to satisfy our curiosities about what has been hidden behind this face. We can shift our position slightly or circumnavigate the object, since one property of most objects is that they can be *surrounded*. Isolation is potential. Things that can’t be surrounded but only faced provoke a stand-off. They are the “face of a nation” that stops us at the boundaries, or admits us only on temporary visas. The face, profile, and silhouette come with a correlative enigma: we don’t know what’s behind or inside, but we give a name to it that describes the unpredictable *will* we use to designate the object’s autonomy and independence. Even a rock seems to “do what the rock

wants to do,” and Louis Kahn was famous for attributing this stubbornness to bricks.

Drawing a line around the circumference of the object or person we see in our visual field acknowledges the temporal conjunction of a viewer with a viewed. It is a statistical datum of this encounter. As a photo captures an instant, gives us a profile, the line of the silhouette divides the space of the viewer and the viewed, and designates the spaces behind visible objects that, thanks to the visibility from one point of view, generates invisibilities elsewhere. We can “liquidate” many parts of this invisibility simply by shifting our point of view, but in the process we generate new invisible regions. As long as there are opaque objects, invisibility persists as a function of our looking, and the meeting line between the seen and unseen is the profile as a *datum*.

Paying Off Debts

The profile is a form of capture or entrapment, and the magical use of shadows, easier to capture than the person who generates them, has been common practice in architecture, where the line measuring the shadow’s extent can be used in place of a literal sacrifice. The effectiveness this practice advertises reveals the logic, that the shadow has power over the body and is a form of the *conatus* by which the subject is

¹ Hal Foster, “Massive Egg,” review of *Magritte: A Life*, by Alex Danchev with Sarah Whitfield, *London Review of Books* (July 7, 2022): 26.

held to a fate while allowed the illusion of free choice. Vico argues that conatus is that part of human impulse that, by being unchanged and immobile, makes change and motion possible.² But, rather than being a part of a binary signifier, Vico seems to assign it the role of the *cut* between motion and rest, fate and free will. This allies conatus with emergence, where free will and determinism are entangled in each other; each “emerges” from the other. This is evident in Cassirer’s comment about the space of entrapment Daphne experiences in her attempt to flee Apollo’s ardent advances — that *as soon as she wished to flee*, she had created her own spatial trap.³

In the non-binary signification of the shadow as the deterministic fate of the free, mobile body, we begin to see how the figure–ground distinction involves a *theft* of something from a ground, creating a debt that *must be paid back*. The silhouette is a marker of this theft, an I.O.U. of what is owed to fate for this borrowed space. The ancient calculus for this was the idea of the Moirai (Μοῖραι), Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. In this ancient system of homeostasis, every benefit and blessing called for a balancing forfeit. This is the logic of tragedy and comedy, expressed as the smile of comedy and the inverted frown feature of tragedy. The tragic hero is launched, thanks to fate or a lucky break, but in the logic of the evil eye, he is getting something he doesn’t deserve. The audience knows in advance that he will have to pay, one way or another. The apogee of this rise is a tipping point, a balance where things have a double meaning. What looks good is actually going to be the weight that tips the scale in the direction of downfall. The audience, amazingly, knows how to read these double signs. They hear, in the tragic hero’s boast, some prophecy that has been ignored. Although they may have come to admire or even love the hero, they know that what will happen *must* happen, so the ending blends the two emotions essential to sacrifice: pain and pleasure, i. e. *jouissance*.

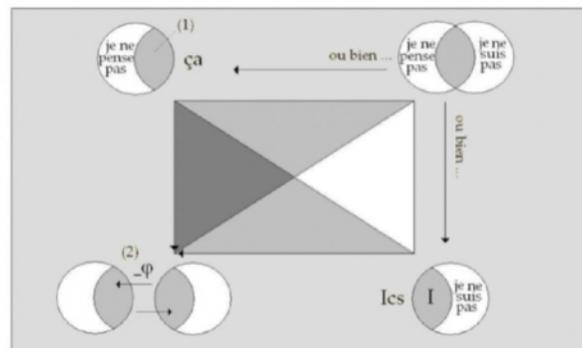
For Comedy, the fall is condensed in the comic figure of the fool who seems already to have paid too much. There are bodily defects to go along with the mental ones, but these make us laugh, and the physical attributes are easier to spot and ready us for the jokes that involve seeing advantages in not being too smart. It is the clever, calculating characters who are at risk in comedy. The fool has already paid, he is debt-free. The object is to unite/re-unite the Oedipal couple and not ask too many questions about “happily ever after,” which must be presumed. The *senex* will be banned, the *miles gloriosus* sent on his way. The defects in the Symbolic will have been repaired and made ready for the next delusion (love as an “ever fixed mark”). To make life bearable, we have to stop at the 180° mark and not think about the heroic progeny who will rush to the top of the circle to reach the apogee where even the dim audience will perceived the double-sided omen, the one the hero thinks is propitious but the audience knows to be a death-knell.

The Comedy-Tragedy cycle tell us this about the profile that cuts the figure out from the ground: it’s billable. While animals will enjoy a perfect life-long union with their shadow, humans will learn the art of detachment. The shadow will have a life (and death) of its own, and this detachability will introduce the possibility of perfection, which will simultaneously create the likelihood of imperfection, defect (comedy), failure and death (tragedy). No detachable shadow, no theater dramas. Also, no architecture. It would not

² Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Times*, trans. Elio Gianturco and Donald Verene (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1980), 34.

³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4*, trans. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980).

be possible, as Sir James Frazer reports, for the Romanian shadow-salesman to covertly measure shadows of would-be victims who, sacrificed, would provide a building with long-range protection; without detachability, the economy that allowed the shadow-salesman to feed his family off his ill-gotten gains to preserve the shadow's measure with strings that can be boxed, priced, and sold according to the prestige of the shadow's original owner.⁴ Ethnography in this case shows how cultures realize the particulars of projective geometry unconsciously, they “know without knowing” (*kenosis*) and *act* on this knowledge. This is a durable triangular relation between repetition, acting (-out), and the psychotic construction of the mantic spirit that can duplicate Subjective speech mechanically, in the way that the oracle at Delphi would not know what she was saying. The result is not the production of suppression but the creation of metonymic chains that, enigmatically, could predict the future. Again, I reproduce Lacan's reference polygon:



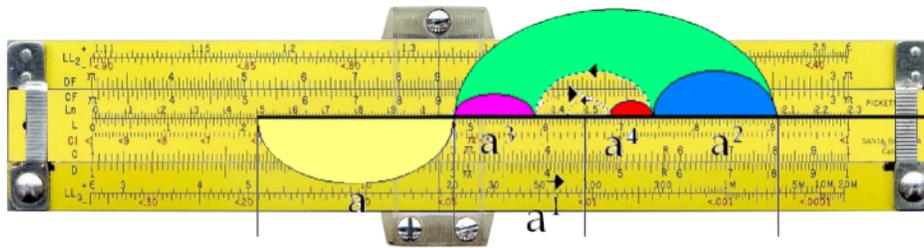
The reference polygon of the torus begins with Repetition's split into two vectors, one “external” to the Symbolic and, hence, “psychotic” (*passage à l'acte*), the other “internal” to the Symbolic (acting-out). These vectors recombine at the point where the Unconscious is structured as a bi-lateral exchange of $-\phi$, a *jouissance* that, in the Analytic session modeled by the L-schema, affords the break-through blocked by the Analyst's blah blah blah. In shadow terms, repetition allows the separation of the body (image) from its shadow (soul?) and makes the shadow vulnerable to capture and damage, or re-purposing as a sacrifice to solidify building foundations. In this latter case, the bi-lateral exchange is thanks to the “union without intersection” of two Euler circles, creating a tension that will be the homeostasis mechanism that is also a balance-of-payments scheme allowing fiction (*ex falso quodlibet sequitur*) to rotate as a comic-tragic smile/frown. The key here is to see how the horizon dividing this circle into 180° halves functions as both a limit and internal divide, appreciable in as brief a form as the metonymy with its step-function, of moving Y at the same time X is swallowed. This is the death drive, which Freud required to correct his pleasure-principle model of homeostasis, and which Lacan realized as the need to *subtract* a dimension rather than think of the death drive as a back exit to the carnival grounds.

The point here is to suggest that the polygon of the torus, which Lacan relates to the expansion of repetition/demand and the contraction of suppression, has a “figure-ground” function, where a shadow is rendered detachable, thanks to the language abilities of every human subject. The cut, on the reference polygon, would be the diagonal connecting the *passage à l'acte* with acting out — externality with internality. This is *precisely* how the cut functions on the cross-cap, or the twist on the Möbius band. In the case of the figure's distinction from the ground by means of a conversion of the visible object into a face, and thence a shadow-face (silhouette, with implications of a fate), a debt is accrued. The figure is *stolen* from the ground, and this crime must be avenged. Temporality is introduced. The crime at this moment

⁴ This account is to be found only in the multi-volume set of *The Golden Bough*. I wrote about it in “Skiagraphy and the *Ipsium* of Architecture,” *Architecture and Shadow, Via XI* (1990): 62-75, with Wesley Wei.

necessitates a future moment at which the past will meet up with its (non-)future — the inside-out figure of the future anterior.

The problem with the circumference of the figure and its depth–relation to the ground is the creation of two competing vanishing points. One of course is predominantly visual and Euclidean. Figure-ground distinction is the part of visual experience that is primal in relation to the subsequent ordering of space through the dimension of depth. No figure-ground, no depth; no depth, no vanishing point. Here, cultures diverge. As is evident from ethnographical studies, different cultures configure depth in different styles. We might revise the sequence of Cartesian dimensions, 1234 (the X-Y of the picture plane, the Z of depth, the T of time) to read 12₄3. The idea of temporality must be *inserted* for depth perception to occur. Time is not the extreme element, but the internal one. It is the *mean* that allows space to be bounded (the extreme). The reordering of the Cartesian space+time model, 1234 to 12₄3, shows that time takes the position of the \emptyset in Lacan’s “slide-rule” analogy:



Lacan’s slide-rule analogy demonstrates the relation of the Big Other, A, to the *objet petit a*, as a geometric relation of the 1 (which Lacan reserves to compare to the unary trait) to the Golden Ratio, the *mean and extreme*, a mathematical relation of “outer terms” (A and D) to the “inner terms” B and C) in the standard formula for analogy. $A:B :: C:D$, or $A/B = C/D$. Lacan elsewhere demolishes the idea that metaphor is “analogy with one term missing,” Perelman’s thesis. Instead, metaphor follows a more sophisticated view of the mean and extreme, where the latent signifier appears first as the denominator that is suppressed and, in an adjacent numerator, is expressed (again the theme of inside–outside, mean and extreme) to “cancel out” arithmetically. A more nuanced view holds that the • that allows this comparison to canceling out is actually Vico’s metaphysical point, which is the point where a balance is tipped although the point seems to offer no internal division. The point is the essence of Lacan’s *not-all*, both the hallmark of the *woman* and the basis for his style of lecturing, the *mi-dire*.

Thus, temporality in this conjecture is the \emptyset that is simultaneously an internal cut and an external bound: the *harmonic* or dynamic binomial function that, in the form of the Golden Ratio, concerns itself, like the reference polygon of the torus, with an extimacy that simultaneously generates an externality (psychosis and mechanical reproduction, exemplified in prophecy/divination) and internality (acting out within the Symbolic, internal discontinuities, transgression). Now, the polygon opens itself up to “ethnological confirmation.” We must look to the uncanny practices of early cultures where ritual practices (epitomes of the element of repetition) confirm this split into automated psychotic revelations in relation to transgressive behaviors and their ethical products: laws.⁵

⁵ Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine Giambattista Vico’s idea of *conatus*, it is entirely relevant. Vico moved from a purely physical idea of *conatus* (the non-moving principle of all motion) to a legal–ethical account in his work on natural law. Here, Vico preserves a metonymical schema, where an impulsive act reveals an internal logic *not belonging to the subject*. See Tommaso Parducci, “Sul concetto di *conatus* nella filosofia di Vico,” *Laboratorio dell’ISPF*, Istituto per la Storia del Pensiero Filosofico e Scientifico Moderno XV, 2018, DOI: 10.12862/Lab18PRT

Theft, therefore, is not completely beyond the range of our abbreviated inquiry into the origins and implications of the figure–ground distinction. The 12₄3 model, as opposed to the 1234 accounts for the way that spatial perception differs not just from culture to culture but individual to individual and even emotion to emotion, causing space itself to deform. This differs radically from conformist accounts of space as a given, modified by behaviors, experience, and cultural factors. Space is an effect rather than a causal force, giving whatever happens a built-in spatial “mandate” that reinforces spatial behaviors.⁶ As such, both Lacan and Vico advised us to find “as many causes possible” for this effect, since there was no simple mandatory link. This means that the extraction of a figure from a ground is by no means an automatic or mechanical process, but that from the beginning space is being made; from the beginning there is a cut, and the content of what is cut comes after.

In Claude Bragdon’s view, four-dimensional spaces contains four-dimensional objects, and the proof of this extra-dimensional invisible domain is by analogy. Just as points bound lines and lines bound planes, and planes bound solids, the question becomes “what do solids bound.” Bragdon forgets that this bounding is accomplished graphically, and that past the 2-d plane of demonstration the dimension of depth has to be represented indirectly, through projection. Neither perspective nor orthographic project, however, are able to represent visual experience, which involves motion, parallax, memory, and cultural conditioning that laces together things with words and ideas, and where the uses of space shape our perception of what lies in the distance. The break from the surface of representation is critical, for it is disregarded in the mental exercise of extending the function of bounding to a fourth dimension.

Time has been excluded in the bounding process, although even in Euclidean demonstrations the *action* of bounding is critical. Temporality as such is the key to how organisms use space differently, how all spaces and objects in spaces are related. For Bragdon, however, the Cartesian postponement of time as a fourth dimension is accepted on account of space’s arguable simultaneity. It seems that all things in space exist in every moment, equally, but in fact there is no means of capturing this simultaneity, since everything caught in our view blocks off a part of that view, and panoptical views, like panoramic ones, must be constructed.

If one moves from a bounding strategy to an extension strategy, the problem is the same. If a line is said to be a moving point and a surface is made by moving the line, and then the solid by moving the surface, temporality is built in from the start but unaccounted for in any model that excludes this method of generation but isolates temporality as a fourth dimension. The correction, 12₄3, divides retinal stimulation from 3-space by a temporal function that may be filled with a combination of: (1) muscular engagement, even as simple as the contraction of the eye to “pull focus” on objects at varying distances; (2) patterns of physical use of spaces, actual or imagined; (3) perceptual clues of depth, such as perspective,

⁶ This differs radically from the “1234–style” approaches that isolate the fourth dimension as a factor added to Euclidean space. Claude Bragdon’s *A Primer of Higher Space (The Fourth Dimension)* (Rochester, NY: Manas Press, 1913). For Bragdon, space is given to everyone in the same Euclidean envelope, but some individuals gain access to the fourth dimension, allied with time, and some cultures formalize this access and institutionalize it through religious and art practices. This accepts Euclidean space as self-sufficient and independent of any psychic or perceptual involvement. In contrast, Gestalt psychology and phenomenology regards space as constructed and highly conditioned by language and usage. This agrees even with the biological model of the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll who famously claimed that there was a fly-world for flies as much as a dog-world for dogs. Each species and even individual within a species constructed an *Umwelt*, social yet malleable. The difference between this view and Bragdon’s is that the constructive element is dynamic and fluid, present in every spatial event, as an invisible (“virtual”) dimension of effectiveness.

sound, motion, which index distance, such as the converging lines in a perspective drawing; and (4) memories of past uses of spaces that support patterns of engaging depth conditions. In other words, there is no *automatic* extension of the way light stimulates the flat retina to the perception of depth that might simplify the combination of these factors, which are co-produced by multiple factors. This is proven to be the case by blind people whose sight has been restored, that retinal experiences confuse them because they have not been educated to the use of the depth dimension.

Because Bragdon bases the natural phenomenon of perception on a Euclidean model, the acculturation of the depth function is discounted and temporality is converted into a spatial dimension where 3-d objects are held to bound 4-d objects and spaces. Access to these are limited to the “madmen, poets, and lovers” (one must add mystics) whose special abilities get them past the barriers into a magical plenum. There is sufficient folklore, historical accounts, and contemporary experiences to make this plenum both credible and appealing, so the model of Euclid-plus is presumed to be true. But, there are structural and psychoanalytical reasons that it cannot be.

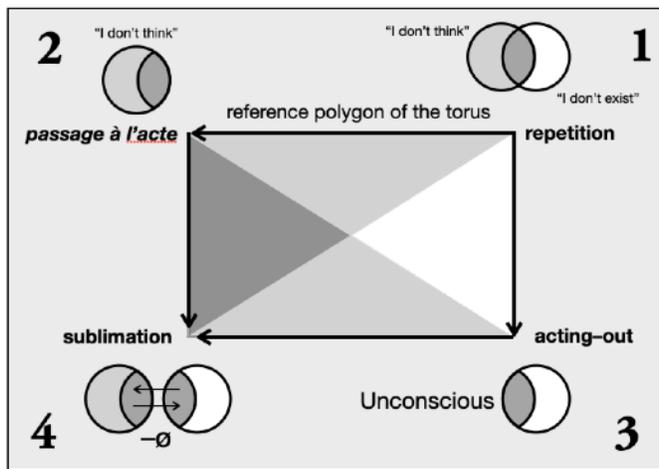
The first is that temporality is present from the start of perceptual experience. This is Lacan’s point in connecting the Symbolic with the retroactive moment of the young subject’s realization of his double status. On one hand, his/her spectral self is projected in a virtuality set off by a spatial cut that produces chiralistic “faces,” one the mirror view, the other the view that the subject must accept as the way others see him/her. Space is produced through a series of acts and events. It is staged even when circumstances appear to be accidental. Space is the space of the subject, it is the externality of the subject where, despite its objective extension, is conditioned by intimacy and investment (cathexis). Physical space would seem perfectly describable, given the sophistication of mapping geo-location; but as with all space, key concepts that subjectivize our experience of space, such as flatness, distance, presence, and motion are always problematic. For Lacan, the priority of the cut makes the space of subjectivity fundamentally paradoxical. Unlike Bragdon’s contrast of domestication into three Euclidean dimensions, space for Lacan is radically resistant to domestication, radically uncanny. This is “Euclid-minus” in contrast to Bragdon’s “Euclid-plus.” The cut that has retinal experience confront its double at the Mirror Stage introduces a 2-space that, instead of successfully dividing the 3-d spaces on either side of it, creates a circularity *and* a circuit that the subject assimilates and reproduces in every subsequent spatial experience. One could say that, while the subject makes every effort to domesticate space and time through fantasy and Euclidean certainties, these efforts always fail; space’s nature is radically undomesticated, radically uncanny.

What Do We Gain with the Figure-Ground Analogy?

My figure-ground analogy has been to find a way to introduce the idea of conatus into our discussions of XIV. Why make something complex more complex? I was actually hoping that conatus could become the key to thinking about the idea that fantasy has a STRUCTURE. I don't know what the last half of the seminar has in store, but each time I looked into one of Lacan's demo's or expressions I would find a wealth of unexpected materials.

This was especially the case with “mean and extreme,” which I thought was just a generic way of referring to the Golden Ratio. Specifically, it refers to the analogy form, AB:CD, where A and D are the extreme and BC the mean terms. The other way of writing this, $A/B = C/D$ recalled Lacan's other “fractional” expressions, both for metaphor and his discourse mathemes in Seminar XVII. I don't think I

am the only one to connect the metaphor formula to parapraxis; Lacan himself does it in Seminar V, so I feel justified.



Metaphor and discourse are tough going for first-time readers of Lacan. So, my idea here was to use something basic, like the figure-ground distinction to make sense of that diagram that keeps popping up in Seminar XIV.

If you regard sublimation as “pushing something back” you would be right to think that the ground in the figure-ground distinction involves sublimation and that we could use it as a model for what happens in this “toroid” account of the analytic situation.

The problem in figure-ground distinctions is how the figure is formed is by no means easy to explain theoretically. It relates to flattening the face that appears to the viewer so that the shadow behind the figure has an “orthographic” relation to the figure we endow, in perception, as something autonomous, mobile, objective. Of course the figure is 3-d, but this flattening is related to the way we relate something to a field that is pushed to the back in comparison, and made to be a “field of relations.”

This is done unconsciously of course. But, to account for how objects we perceive acquire their autonomy, we have to play back our perception in slow-motion and analyze the parts. “Conatus” ordinarily stands for objects' power of independence and, in a magic way of talking, “command our respect.” They become the Other, something we have defined by our perception to be independent of our perception.

Here, Vico comes in handy, since he uses conatus to define the way thought begins, the first thought, and his account duplicates what Lacan says about metaphor. SOMETHING IS SUPPRESSED ... and a figure is formed in perception that is given super-natural powers ... conatus. The formation has religious and legal power: Jove, as law-giver. At first Jove's will must be interpreted through divination. As heroic mentality develops, Jove becomes more of an endorser of human legal actions, which are at first wars to rectify situations (think of the Greeks attacking Troy).

Think of the torus in all this as a template regulating the economies of containment and incontinence. For the drama of containment, we have The Iliad, for incontinence, The Odyssey. The figure and figuration are first, in human mythic thought, godlike. As thought secularizes, this modifies into semi-divine heroic thinking/acting. Finally, thought is fully domesticated in the idea of objects and other subjects who live by the rules of everyday physics.

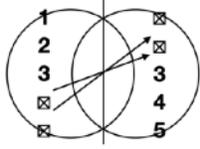
This rather expansive account talks mostly about figures whose conatus is at first god-like, then heroic, then human. But, what about the ground? This is the modification of the world, the setting for such actions empowered by conatus, a “charged field” that, by being pushed into the background, disappears only to re-emerge in terms of influences whose incontinence escapes explanation. The forces that intervene in the

hero's travels, for example, form a kind of divine "plenum" that folds like the torus, to enclose the hero's failed attempts at continence with another void, an incontinent one of divine influence.

If we want to know how the charged field works, we look to Freud's example of parapraxis to see how metonymy links together improbable names, places, and events. The "heroic traveler," Freud, experiences coincidences and uncanny clues. What is happening behind the scene of course is that Freud, the foreigner, has seen, in the name Signorelli, the forceful presence of the Master, the SIGNOR, that is anamorphically present in the painter's name. Only a foreigner (separated from the Italian language) would notice this presence; the result is that what happens to him subsequently acts out within his own Symbolic construct, the journey across the Adriatic. In Lacan, separation and alienation always act in concert. Separation and alienation, the "mean and extreme" of the torus polygon, are going to return to the point of suppression to finish the story. The two voids, the internal and continent one and the external and incontinent one — the figure and the ground so to speak — are going to resolve the ground's role as a "field of play" allowing the message that has been in the background to reach the figure.

CONATUS, with its material (contained) and immaterial (uncontained) aspect is about how things are allowed to change and still retain their *character*. Temporality is also something that allows change but supports the idea of a central pivot that does not change. This is something that every culture seems to represent in its own way. The Mayans perhaps did the best job, by discovering a pivot that allowed accurate prediction of all of the celestial/sidereal "wheels" to rotate in perfect coordination, until the "end of time." What should rankle us about Claude Bragdon's radical Euclidean account of space is that it denies the role of time even though its step-wise construction clearly requires it to get from line to plane to solid. Ah, only at this point does Bragdon allow time to appear! But, time has been there all along. Vico took time back into the construction of the indivisible point, showing that, though indivisible, was only *partial* — another key link to Lacan! Vico's "metaphysical point" was in essence a distinction, nothing more. In Lacan's terms, this would be the cut, which exists prior to whatever is being cut. The cut you remember is something that the 2-d surface does not recognize; it's only when the 2-d surface is immersed into 3-space that the cut appears as a paradoxical transition from inside to outside and *vice versa*. The cut's visibility/invisibility puts it at the heart of the issue of the figure, which appears simultaneously with the *disappearance* of space behind it and the sublation of the ground against which it is chosen as something more important.

Conatus covers all of these complexities. In concert with Lacan's toroidal diagram, where repetition places temporality at the origin of the split of inside and outside that gives us the tension we need to deploy the figure-ground, implicates a folding (lower left-hand corner) where the continence/incontinence division will return, as a Real. We can think of this logically, or *psycho*-logically, or we can look at literature and the arts, or folklore and ethnography, to see how cultures have involved anamorphosis and parapraxis in their stories and religious practices. I prefer a combination method. As Vico put it, we must think both philosophically and philo-*logically*. We must regard the *ex falso* constructions of cultures (myths and fictions) as sources of the psyche's True Speech. With this, I return to the expression, "mean and extreme," which appears in the form of the toroid polygon's extreme terms, repetition and sublimation, closing off the distinction of "internal" and "external" situations of acting-out and *passage à l'acte*. I do not fully understand the meaning of these terms individually. I know that acting-out is how the alienated subject uses nonsense terms to express the pure power of language, detached from any representational convention, to be "either a genius or a criminal" (as in the case of the Rat Man, who calls his father a towel,



a plate, a lamp). I also know that *passage à l'acte* functions, critically, in analysis, to insert *delays* or *prompts* in the Analysand's blah blah blah. Both acting-out and the *passage à l'acte* defy conventional, hierarchical subordination of the signifier to the signified. We don't use language to "describe things" or designate, but as "raw expression." This is what Freud's metonymies in his parapraxis retain: a minimum

power to connect, to relate to the *ground* that has been suppressed but, by that very suppression, charged with the latent meanings that will eventually appear as a kind of epiphany or realized prophecy.

So, we don't have to know everything; in fact it is better that we proceed as fools who bumble on and let one story find a finish in another story, neglecting the need to complete our proofs. I've used conatus as a grain of sand to stimulate the growth of a pearl, to "shake up the system." Jodi has used Bragdon to show just how much we rely on rejecting time to produce a fictional idea of time as separate from space. In such cases, we use the rule of taking two steps back from what is being presented as an axiomatic situation. What has *already had to have happened* to get us to this point?

Taking two steps back ... why two? Ready, set ... go! The first step is the alert, a moment of anxiety induced to turn toward one case *to the exclusion of some other case*. The second step is to assume a consensus that allows a quick passage to the core of a problem. With this, the rules of the game restrict discourse and ordain a foregone conclusion. Such is the case with Descartes' *je pense donc je suis*. (1) I'm thinking, so (2) I must exist. But, it's too late by the time this principle is taken in. Already someone is speaking, and speaking presumes both thinking and existing. The claim can't come out of nowhere. The achievement of Descartes famous claim is the *donc*, "therefore." It doesn't follow. Lacan realizes this and separates being and speaking by casting out their mirror images: "I don't think" is a more interesting conjecture, since it contradicts the fact of articulation. "I don't exist" also contradicts the fact of the speech that carries this claim. These two negations spread out to define positions inside and outside the Symbolic, so now it becomes clear that the aim has been to describe the Symbolic *as having an inside and outside*, something we hadn't thought of before. The function of an inside is continence, and the exception that Lacan gives to prove the rule is acting-*out*. This is the position of the genius or criminal, both of whom remain within the Symbolic but violate its rules.

How does one get outside the Symbolic? This is the position of the speaker who, lacking an Unconscious, must imitate the human speaker.⁷ And, experience proves that psychotics are indeed expert simulators. What is the *act* that is the goal of the *passage à l'acte*? In Analysis it is the moment that allows the Other, the Unconscious of the Analysand, to assert itself. Without knowing more, we would have to stop were it not for the torus reference polygon, where, from the origin point of repetition (note the temporality), expand to an inside and outside position simultaneously, along two orthogonal vectors. Connecting these, we have a kind of equator where, from the position of the subject's demand, there is a cross-over, a shift from expansion to contraction. At the corner where the *passage à l'acte* and acting-out

⁷ Conjecture: Being "outside the Symbolic" is in fact the position of the Real. This is the difference between "having" an unconscious and *being the Unconscious*. Psychotics are Real in the sense that they simulate the Symbolic, like the Unconscious. But, also the Unconscious is in a definite sense psychotic in that it is instance of bijection. Lacan notes that human language is non-bi-univocally concordant, i. e. not a 1:1 relation of signifiers and signifieds. The Unconscious, in contrast, "never forgets" but is "structured like a language." In the addendum to his essay on Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Lacan produces a facsimile demonstration of how the Unconscious might structure a given sequence so that a determinative sequence emerges from a seemingly random sequence.

will converge, “I am not” and “I think not” join up in an exchange of $-\emptyset$ that is channeled along the edge of the void created by (as we have learned from Lacan’s distinction of the function of Euler circles from Venn circles) the symmetrical difference we have compared to the O. Henry story about the woman who cuts her hair to buy a golden chain for the husband who has sold his watch to buy her a jeweled comb. This is not such an eccentric reading. The standard Lacanian definition of love as “giving what you don’t have to someone who doesn’t want it” is more understandable as a symmetrical difference.

This is the “bed” that charges the ground of the sexual act, the sex, which materializes the Euler condition of “union without intersection.” The point here is that the topological Real is a part of our most intimate subjectivity, not a postponed or conditional fourth dimensionality that converts ordinary reality into a hyper-state. The meaning of conatus is not that there is an atom of experience that is split, but that the atom of experience *is* the split. The “two steps back” from our fantasy of a given three-dimensional reality in perception is to the cut that, for the stimuli felt by the retina, exercises a muscular, dynamic fold to distinguish an incontinent ground from a continent figure, endowing the figure as an Other with intentionality and opacity, a face that conceals at the same time it presents itself to the viewer.

Thus, there is no passive “given” in perception, where the eye passively receives light directly or reflected off objects in the visual field. Perception begins with the cut, but the results re-package the third moment into a *first*, contextualized by memory and charged with the intentionality of the moment. The Real First, however, was the cut that, for the subsequent formation of a perspectival visual field, will constitute an impasse but for the topology of the Real is a continuum. The cut is thus not a cut into something prior but a cut *into itself*, a self-negating feature that accomplishes projective topology’s two properties, self-intersection and non-orientation. The split is the split in the standard polygon of the torus into acting-out and the *passage à l’acte*, to positions outside and inside the Symbolic, and to a subsequent closure at the opposite corner of the polygon as *suppression*, which I propose modeling as the suppression of a ground allowing the emergence of a figure. The incontinence of the ground reveals that the vector from the “psychotic” position of the *passage à l’acte* is a *mimesis* of the Symbolic as bi-univocal concordance, a 1:1. The vector from the “neurotic” position of acting-out is the alienation of the signifier detached from its representational function (the Rat Man’s “names of the father,” *lamp, towel, plate*).⁸

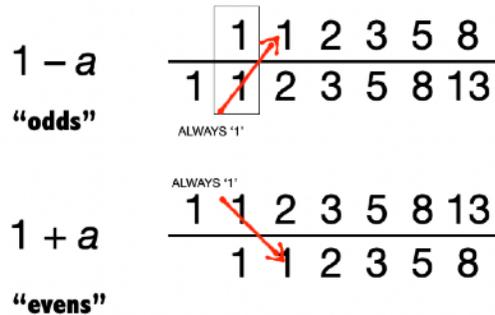
In either case, psychotic or neurotic, the theme of alienation aligns with the separation of the object from the background that is the moment in perception that we “count as one.” Counting two steps back, however, we recall the split that takes place in repetition at the opposite corner of the polygon. Lacan: **“This of course, implies within the act, a repetition. It is only by reworking the lack in an infinitely repeated fashion, that you reach the limit that gives its measure to the entire work. Naturally, in order for this to function, it is necessary that the measure should be correct at the start. Because, notice something: with the measure small *a*, that we have given as being an especially harmonic measure, you**

⁸ This is an opportunity to note how the “names of the father” are employed to allow the neurotic to stay within the bounds of the Symbolic. Acting-out challenges the bounds of these names by reducing the names to a zero degree, *instances* without the function of designation. Thus, the names of the father are, at their foundation, audio-active — able to function fully without designating any meaningful indicative content. At this zero-degree level, the speaker is either, as the father of the Rat Man noted, either a genius or a criminal.

have the following formula: $1 + a + a^2 \dots$ (etc. ... to infinity as regards the powers invoked) is equal to $1/1-a$.⁹

Lacan explains further: “It is easy to see that they are going, as I might say, towards meeting one another, until they totalise themselves in one, but that the point where the cut will be produced, between the odd powers and even powers, is easy to calculate. ... This is not only true for the a of the correct measure, that of the golden number, in so far as it serves as an image for us, to the measure of the subject with respect to sex in an ideal case. This functions for any x whatsoever, of whatever value, on this simple condition that this x is included between 0 and 1. Namely, that it also involves, with respect to 1, some defect or some lack.”¹⁰

Here, Lacan follows up the centrifugal elaborations with a centripetal pulling-together of themes and arguments. It is as if theory itself has created a series of little a 's squared, then cubed, and so on ... but that instead of spiraling out and away the result has been to focus on the value of the Golden Ratio, which in fact is a *cut* between a number and itself, taken as a series of numbers, each of which is the result of itself and its predecessor (again, the “two steps back” strategy).



The results of taking the series from the side of its odd powers or its even powers is neutralized by the relation to the $1/1-a$, a recursive form that Lacan, in Seminar XVII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, cites as the form of the unary trait. Elsewhere, I have called the unary trait “audio-active,” in that it is both a designation (the representative function) and an instance. The instance aspect is what allows Lacan to say that every act of speech involves repetition. Instance is a form of content that is both a designation and a non-designation: “How many times have I told you to turn out the lights?” Here the point is that repetition may be more significant than the advertised content of the repetition (to turn out the lights). Insistence is unary in that it is not the number of demands to turn out the lights that is important. Just the opposite. The repetition always returns the demand to a starting-point, an originary position where there is a *lack*, a cut, an obstacle that needs to be addressed. In the two Fibonacci series above, the “always 1” of the diagonal produces increasingly accurate estimates of the number to be subtracted or added to 1 to produce some version of the Golden Ratio, a “mean and extreme” in that the relation of a 1x1 square to an adjacent smaller rectangle will be the same as that as to the adjacent larger rectangle.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Logic of Phantasy*, Seminar XIV, trans. Cormac Gallagher. <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf>, Session 14, p. 157.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Is not the unary trait the essence of our subjectivity, our status as barred, \$? Isn't every demand, even the first time it's presented, in essence a repetition, a 1/1-a? Doesn't every demand to the Other embody the lack that will "keep it going to the end of time," a perpetual surface that, intersecting itself, will always produce non-orientation, a cut that is projectively a flow-through but perspectively a figure that blocks the view? Will this figure not always present a profile that strives to be bounded but admits a defect, a flaw in its plan to contain a space and give it will and power? And, is this failure to extend will and power forever not the payment of a debt for the figure as "stolen goods"?

We should not try to reason out these answers, but to think back (two steps? Vico: from rational to heroic, then heroic to mythic?) to the beliefs of first peoples, that they were chthonic — "born of the earth"? This is the nearly universal idea that, as Goethe put it, *Hans Adam wer ein Erdenkloss*, a clod of earth, formless, *formed* by divine intent, given its *conatus* thanks to a figure-ground distinction.¹¹ We come from earth and to earth return, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. By means of this materiality, spirit becomes possible, either from an interior alienation or exterior separation, a consciousness and Unconsciousness. The first time was a return.

Where to? A Footnote about Stereograms



The ground is suppressed so as to be unnoticed, unconsidered. The figure attracts attention, and with attention, the possibility that the gods are watching and noting the precise debt that will be owed to the figure who, "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," must return its *conatus* to the void from which it has borrowed its existence. In this arched drama from birth to death, aspiration to defeat, Adam back to *Erdenkloss*, the ground is a witness as well as a scrupulous record of Accounts Receivable. As such, its perfect passivity must be regulated by a divine

law of background orderliness. Is there any better example of this than the tile patterns found in the Alhambra, the fortress complex in Grenada. With mathematical precision, graphic designs link figures in ways that can be reconfigured by even a casual observer. This is not a passive ground by default; it is a *construction* of the very passivity that guarantees that the ground is capable of the role of a recording secretary for any would-be emerging figure.

In Ben Nicholson's study of Michaelangelo's floor-tile designs for the Laurentian Library, a curious thesis forms. To facilitate the thought formations of the scholars working with ancient texts, the tiles supported — literally — the pacing scholar's random musing by offering patterns that were



Ben Nicholson, "Under Foot and between the Boards in the Laurentian Library," a study of Michaelangelo's tile designs to energize the imagination and memory of scholars who, taking a break from their study of texts, would perambulate the space between the carrels to "gather their thoughts" according to the rules of emergent symmetry, the sorites.

¹¹ Goethe's *Lieder, Erschaffen und Beleben* (1891), reads for the full verse: "Hans Adam war ein Erdenkloß / Den Gott zum Menschen machte, / Doch bracht er aus der Mutter Schoß / Noch vieles Ungeschlachte." Translation: "Hans Adam was a lump of clay / That God made into man, / But he produced from Mother Earth / Much else that was uncouth."

slightly askew. Small errors in the geometries were not evident at first, but through repeated treading, scholars would, unconsciously perhaps, pick up on these as pure difference. On one hand, the “errors” could not have been oversights of the artist, who had to calculate each line, color and shape. On the other hand, what did these infinitesimal variations mean? What was the point of creating a (literal) ground with such minor imperfections?

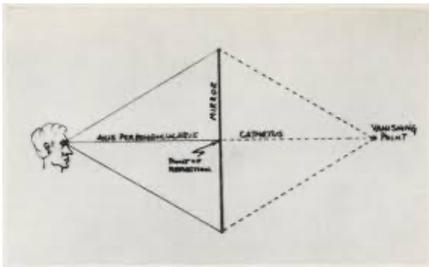
Everyone by now has run into the stereogram, a repeated pattern that seems to be nothing more than a 2-d ornament. This is the conclusion of one who searches for a figure in or in front of the pattern. However, a viewer who allows his/her eyes to focus on an infinitely remote distant point, the parallel lines of sight will “catch” two views of the pattern and mentally merge them. Slight incongruencies can be designed to create an “internal parallax effect” that forms a virtual form that will emerge after the viewer has achieved this distant un-focus.

The pattern remains but a visual space thickens to contain the emergent shape. The effect is entirely neural in the sense that the perception must shift into a “neural” mode, reversing the normal order of stimulus–response. The viewer seems to regain the ability to focus on the emergent shape, and the ability to “look around” the thickened space. Even with small shifts of the head, the form persists and shifts slightly against its background. Within this new virtuality, created out of a pattern difference, a conatus arises that is incontestably fictional. Nonetheless, the virtuality is experienced directly, concretely.

Here, I am tempted to make an analogy. The stereogram pattern is a special case of the complex “patterns for reflection” found in ornament constructed as a geometrical background. But, in the idea of an *active background* we have to rely on the Lacanian concept of repetition that can reduce to a zero degree of *instance*, where any reference to figures is denied. This is actually the ideal of Islamic art, which prohibits the representation of any object of nature — a prohibition Kant admired in his *Critique of Judgement*, in both Islamic and Jewish art. My contention is that this prohibition is not a marker separating representational art (of Christianity) and non-representational (Judaism and Islam) as much as it is a much more basic kind of distinction. This is the distinction between the *form* — the emergent illusion of three-dimensional objectivity — and the *form-active*, as the patterned ground from which this illusion seems to arise. On one hand there is a ground in which there are regular deviations, ∂ ; and as a result of these there is something that arises with a unique or rather *unary* relationship to the viewer. Just as the object that suddenly pops up into a thin virtual space in the stereogram, there is an equal and opposite interpellation of the viewer who, before this moment, was an S, a subject–as–signifier, but is now \$, a signifier *for* another signifier. The barred S, \$, is valued in relation to the Other, but the Other is opaque: a disk–like silhouette that, as it turns toward the viewer, simultaneously blocks what is behind it.

In the stereogram, the formation of a figure that suddenly appears to the viewer who is able to relax his/her focus to allow both eyes to stare in parallel at infinity uses that part of the 2-d pattern that is slightly deformed, ∂ , so that it stands out along the depth axis created by this difference. The illusion is that there is a space behind the new object, but the reality is that the object’s projection is nothing but the pattern itself. The answer to the riddle is that the riddle was posed as such, and we look to the structure of the riddle to discover this anterior space that appears to be beneath the now–opaque object. The structure is that of a solid, although we know very well that there is nothing but a pattern, D, with a precisely deformed set of relational deformations, ∂ .

The limitations of the stereogram allow it conform to the requirements of a control in an experiment where the researcher and subject are one and the same person. Or, a more accurate way of saying this would be that the researcher is able to remain conscious while forcing a certain passivity on the muscles that normally would focus on a pattern at close distance. The simulated paralysis of focus, the stare out into infinity, is the causal element introduced to perception; the observed result of this experimental stimulus, the 3-d illusion that springs forth from the pattern that becomes background, divides the observer into experimenter and subject, a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” able to claim an independent and empirical distance from each other. The contention here is that the difference in the stereogram pattern, ∂_P , is analogous to the difference ∂_S the observing subject is able to impose on him/herself. Condensing this into a more general formula, S/\$, the “subject as signifier,” is related to the subject *for* the Other, as ∂_P is related to ∂_S . S/\$: $\partial_P \partial_S$. The mean or inner terms, \$ and ∂_P correspond to the inner virtuality of the stereogram. The enveloping “if” in the if/then experiment is formed by the extreme terms, S and ∂_S . The S is barred by the imposed paralysis of focus, S>\$. The result is the conversion of the deformed pattern, P, into a “ground,” S, that appears to lie behind the emergent form, ∂_P to ∂_S . The form that is the figure is co-terminal (= one thing beginning where the other ends, and *vice versa*) with the ground.



The pattern of the stereogram doesn't really lie behind the figure that suddenly pops into view once the focus is anesthetized, but the ability of the viewer to “look around” the newly thickened space provides this illusion. It is a neural illusion, since there is no other source to credit. It is borrowed from the perspectival experience of having the vanishing point “travel along with” the viewer as the viewer moves through space. This is most easily perceived as two vanishing points to the left and right of the path of travel: \div , each point created by a line

orthogonal to the line of travel. This is the phenomenon of cathetus. Brunelleschi named this axis from the durable correspondence between the viewer and the point within reflected space that works as an antipode. The mirror will preserve the orthogonality of perspective despite the angle of its surface in relation to the viewer. A parallel viewer will be created within the mirror's virtual space, with the same orthogonal relation to the vanishing point as the viewer looking into the mirror at a right angle.¹²

It would be strange to compare the subject's creation of this “other” virtuality to Vico's famous “proof of the body,” but the same self-experimental conditions seem to apply. In a section of *The New Science* describing his method, Vico advised a proof of self-narration. The reader, to authenticate Vico's theory of the subject's formation from a metaphorical act of extimacy (seeing his/her subjectivity disguised, in external phenomena), would reproduce the effect at the site of reading *The New Science* itself. The procedure would involve removing all of the other possibilities by which a subject might develop *conatus* that would, by creating a field of contingent conditions, result in a determinative, developmental “fate.” At the level of perception, this fate was attributed to the object, as independence and, at least in the mythic stage of thought, will. Conatus would not be, simply, this autonomy but autonomy coupled with the fact that autonomy was all-inclusive — *self-emergent*. Chance and necessity, independence and

¹² This result is impossible to conceive if the mirror is, as conventionally, as a reflection. In fact the mirror is a *cut* that produces chiralistic “faces.” This explains why mirrors reverse left and right but not the vertical positions of up and down. Chirality preserves the cathetic/orthogonal relation of viewer to viewed by reproducing both the viewpoint and vanishing point whenever the mirror face is tilted away from the frontal orthogonal position.

predetermination, were two sides of the same coin. Conatus was cathetus seen from the side of the subject, while cathetus was conatus seen from the side of the object.

Vico's "proof of the body" amounted to an imposed split between the observing subject and the observed "objectivity" of the subject — the *same* subject. Only a divided subject, \$, could perform this experiment and test the results "at the site of his/her own body." What was being tested? Clearly: the "/" of the division, the cut, the transformational move from signifier to signifier *for* the Other, S>\$. Visually, the cut is invisible at the level of the stereogram pattern, but visible as the *distinction between the figure and the ground* at the level of the viewer who is able to anesthetize his/her own focus. By "playing dead" visually, the viewer becomes the experimenter who is able to confirm, through this "proof of the body," what actually happens in the process of anamorphosis.

Anamorphosis? How does the stereogram become the generic model for the phenomenon that seems to arise specifically in the early Sixteenth Century? Lacan asks this question in reverse. In Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he speculates: what was, exactly, anamorphosis *before it was anamorphosis*, as we witness it emerging in the distorted wall murals and pop-up skulls that so astounded and amused the viewers of the distorted wall murals at the Monastery of the Minims in Paris or the viewers of Holbein's double portrait of *The Ambassadors*? Lacan was asking, in effect, what was the principle behind the experience of seeing an anamorphic image suddenly emerge from a perspectival ground. Can we ask this same question of the stereogram, since the conditions of the stereogram are more precisely experimental? In the distilled circumstances of the flat pattern, the orthographic stare, the self-imposed paralysis of focus, and the resulting emergence of a thickened virtuality with both cathetic and conative properties, we are within reach of general principles of anamorphosis that can apply to the examples of the Sixteenth Century but also to "what anamorphosis was before it was anamorphosis." What is more, we are on the verge of, if not in the middle of, being able to respond to the challenge that Mladen Dolar put forth in his essay on anamorphosis, namely that it could be applied to each and every aspect of psychoanalysis. This ambitious claim comes within reach *if and only if* we are able to move from the specific circumstances of Holbein and the Minims Monastery to the generic conditions and principles of the stereogram, where cathetus and conatus work in strict coordination, and where there are no other factors, apart from this "controlled experiment," for the observer–scientist and the passive, anesthetized subject to be *one and the same person*. Vico's "proof of the body" is the only methodology in this case. It is the only means by which the subject can realize his/her subjectivity as a *pure cut*, a /, between a signifier and a signifier *for*, an S and a \$. This is a relationship that must be enacted as a neural event, where all environmental causes are ruled out.

The subject's experience of his/her own cut, /, has a name: *extimité*, Englished as "extimacy" or "extimity." This is like saying that the mind–body problem is really the "–" of separation, a dividing mark that generates what lies to its left and right. The connection should possibly be posed in reverse: how *else* can *extimité* be theorized *other than* by a self-experiment of this kind, a "proof of the body"?

Paralysis and Anamorphosis

[to be developed]

Aim: to tie anamorphosis to the fixed view, later to "body loading" of the pickpocket.