

Metaphor and Scene-Blocking

a thought experiment about narrative + architecture

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for Cami, Marion, Negar, and Paul

“To see something three dimensionally is also, explicitly, to see it over time.”

—Anne Wagner, “At the Pinault Collection”¹

In reviewing Paul Ricœur’s essay on “Architecture and Narrativity,”² I was thinking about eclipse, the way one influential work, widely distributed on account of its clarity and seeming self-evidence, can block out others. This is obvious in this essay, since Ricœur makes almost no references to the vast literatures behind either of his subject, architecture and narrative. Possibly this was on account of their respective vastnesses, since it would be impossible to make this essay a “review of literature” of either subject. However, Ricœur has a history of standing in front of a subject and re-stating its principles without regard to scholarship that has preceded him. In his seemingly comprehensive book, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, Ricœur seemed to inventory a large section of mainly European scholars on the issue of metaphor, but he left out two thinkers.³ One was well-known to him, Jacques Lacan; the other was possibly not so well-known, Giambattista Vico, the 18c. Neapolitan philosopher of culture.⁴

Leaving Jacques Lacan completely unreferenced in a book claiming to be a comprehensive study of metaphor as studied by contemporary theorists is a glaring omission in terms of Lacan’s considerable originality on the subject. Arguing against Perelman, who advocated a theory of metaphor grounded in logical analogy, Lacan showed that metaphor lay at the heart of nothing less than the unconscious, where the suppression of one content caused the expression of another, structurally different kind of content.⁵ In other words, metaphor was not an embellishment of ordinary communication, but the formative structure of all speaking and thinking. This is hardly a theory that any author, wishing to be comprehensive, would dare to omit.

¹ Anne Wagner, “At the Pinault Collection,” *The London Review* 44, 14 (21 July 2022): 36–37.

² Paul Ricœur, “Architecture and Narrativity,” *Ricœur Studies* 7, 2 (2016): 31–42, DOI 10.5195/errs.2016.378.

³ Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, (London: Routledge, 1978). This book has nonetheless been cited as foundational and authoritative by Alberto Pérez-Gómez and other architectural theorists.

⁴ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1948). Other key works include *Study Methods of Our Times*, Vico’s inaugural lectures, and a treatise on words in ancient Italian.

⁵ For a survey of Lacan’s widespread writing on metaphor, see Stephanie Swales, “Metaphor of the Subject,” in Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, eds. *Reading Lacan’s Écrits: From ‘Signification of the Phallus’ to ‘Metaphor of the Subject’* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 308–321.

It is even stranger, therefore, that *The Rule of Metaphor* should not mention the only other theory of metaphor to make such a foundational claim, Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, where metaphor is shown to be the basis of human culture, thought, and evolution. It is impossible to understate the importance of Lacan's or Vico's potential importance, and thus equally impossible to say how, in a book about metaphor, there should be not one mention of either of these two theorists.

This was my “backdrop” in coming to “Architecture and Narrativity.” Was Ricœur again to pretend to present a complete inventory of an idea while negatively identifying, through omission, what we should really be studying? Here I found that it was necessary to move from a simple quantitative analysis to a qualitative one. Ricœur's argument can be abbreviated as A+N — how do we combine Architecture and Narrativity? A+N is replaced by a more fundamental question, S+T, or “how do we combine spatiality with temporality”? This amounts to stripping architecture down to an expression of spatial interests while leaving narrativity with its concerns about time's sequentiality, coincidences, and frames. This rhetorical device forces us to accept the idea that architecture is primarily if nothing but spatial, and that narrative, in complement, is primarily if nothing but temporal.

It is easy to show that this is not true, since both architecture and narratives contradict any simplistic division between space and time. We are allowed to write space and time because of the experiential divide that complicates any unified expression, such as “spacetime.”⁶ In the midst of sequential experiences, we confront simultaneity and unity, which contradicts the series idea. In *déjà vu*, a time-fold suggests that time might even be three-dimensional.

The idea of “atmosphere” in fact helps us understand an alternative way of thinking that does not commit such violence as Ricœur's essay. In Italian, the word is *il tempo*, which like the French *le temps* means both “the weather” and “time.” We say something is happening because of the context that is like the weather of the moment, which has an implicit spatial element. A place even has an atmosphere that, even though the weather changes, other things remain. Aldo Rossi, in talking about *tempo* cites the Galleria in Milan, especially on the days when fog comes inside, as one of those distinctive locales where space and time seem to be bonded.

⁶ There are multiple studies of the spatiality of fiction, including Ruth Ronan, “Space in Fiction,” *Poetics Today* 7, 3 (1986): 431–438 or Muriel Rosemberg, “Literary Spatiality as Seen through the Prism of Geography,” in *L'Espace géographique* 45, 4 (2016): 289–294. The idea of literature as purely temporal is simply not acceptable by anyone who studies narrative. Neither is it the case that architecture has ever been thinkable without the implicit element of temporality. As Anne Wagner put it, “To see something three dimensionally is also, explicitly, to see it over time”; Anne Wagner, “At the Pinault Collection,” *The London Review* (July 21, 2022): 37. In other words, *in ordinary perceptual experience* time and space are inextricably linked, but Ricœur seems to ignore this fundamental — and *phenomenological* — reality of life.



Figure 1. (Left) Frontispiece, Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1725/1744); (right) "Cebes Table," from Otto van Veen *Amoris divini emblemata* (1615). Both images suggest a merger between architecture's principal paradigms, the labyrinth and the temple, but both also are about narrativity. Vico's frontispiece, called the *dipintura*, portrays the birth and development of civilizations based on the idea of metaphor, where Cebes' Table depicts mortality as trial-and-error attempts to reach a temple beyond the limits of sensibility.

Successive and Contemporary

We can conceptually divide spacetime into a simultaneous component and a sequential component, but Giambattista Vico was the first to theorize the simultaneity of "the successive and contemporaneous."⁷ Vico speculated that there were three historical mentalities associated with "ages" of myth, heroes, and ordinary humans (Fig. 1). Mythic thought was permeated with a logic of metaphor, which dramatized the process of sublation/suppression and repetition of sequences first as a logic of divination and later a basis for stories. In heroic thought, representation took over as the dominant logic, played out theatrically as rivalry, obstacles, and quests.

Representation laid the foundation for thought's final form, abstraction and conceptualization. Concepts require mythic and heroic thought as antecedents, but they cannot conceptualize either. Particularly difficult is the logic of myth, which modern thought can see only as a kind of analogy. Vico pointed out that analogy was an example of conceptual thinking, so the idea of metaphor as analogy was simply an anachronism.

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer formalized Vico's three categories as expressive, representational, and conceptual functions, using data from anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and literature. These three functions were not categories, but stages that could be historical as well as perceptual "moments" of individual experience. In other words, there is an impressionistic first instant that is dominated by the expressive function (the way things seem to be "meant to be seen"), a representative function when we apply a critical stance (what things seem to be *for*), and a conceptual function when the past and future is added to the present time of a scene. It is the conceptual function that dominates, because we live in cultures that are dominated by

⁷ See Sandra Rudnick Luft, "Hans Blumenberg's Use of Verum/Factum: A Vichian Perspective," *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987): 149–150; see also Luft, "The Legitimacy of Hans Blumenberg's Conception of Originary Activity," *Annals of Scholarship* 5, 1 (Fall 1987). Luft identifies a major rift in Vichians who either understand or do not understand Vico's principle of the simultaneity of the successive and the contemporaneous. See her *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the New Science between Modern and Post-Modern* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 2003), 154. Luft notes that even a prominent Vico scholar, Gianfranco Cantelli, regards Vico's merger of the successive and the contemporaneous as an "apparent inconsistency." See Gianfranco Cantelli, "Reflections on the Vichian Thesis That the Original Language of Humanity was a Language Spoken by the Gods," *New Vico Studies* 11 (1993): 1–12.

abstractions: politics, ethics, equality, destiny, personality, careers, utility, etc. This does not mean that myth and heroics is absent, it means that they have been swept up to be included but re-conceived from the point of view of rationality.

One way of contrasting Vico, who looked mainly at the large scale of history, from the birth nations in myth to their conclusion and downfall in conceptualism, with Lacan, who was concerned with the modern individual's own micro-history of emotions, excuses, misrepresentations, and fantasies, is to say Vico's "successive+contemporaneous" was about the collective of culture, Lacan's "successive+contemporaneous" is about the desire of the individual in present day culture. It is remarkable however that they share a *single* idea of what metaphor is and how it works, and that these two thinkers would not be mentioned even once in Ricœur's book on *The Rule of Metaphor*.

Directly or indirectly, Vico's theory of three different mental temperaments led to several "meta-theories" that were essential "contextuality systems" derived from or correlated to the four humors, the first and most famous being Stephen Pepper's *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence*. The chief difference between meta-theories and Vico's successive+contemporaneous stages was that the categories of meta-theories were based on binary distinctions (hot/cold, wet/dry) that claimed to be based on Empedocles' humoristic metaphysics. The problem is that binaries depend on co-linearity. Simplifying, this is the principle that things divided must be "at the same scale" and "in the same key." The ancient system was, however, not perfectly symmetrical. To calibrate choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic and melancholic humors to the seasons, it was necessary to align blood and phlegm, the wet humors, to constitute a horizon separating a "mortal," continent sequence bounded by life, beginning with marriage/birth at the sanguine position and ending with heroic death at the position of a phlegmatic sunset. Melancholy was the "odd humor out." While the other humors were based on a principle of balance, black bile was poisonous in any amount. Yet, it was the humor of artist, poets, and other geniuses, but also the substance of melancholic madness.

Thematization of the humors overlooked this important asymmetry in an attempt to equalize the four categories as options of various enterprises: science for Pepper, politics for Karl Mannheim, history for Hayden White. The four terms, generalized as formism, organicism, mechanism, and contextualism, were dynamically invested in each other, but theorists tended to treat them as separate worlds, each grounded by its own traditions, assumptions, and history. None of them had Vico/Cassirer's dynamic interchange between what could be called the "ontogenetic" and "phylogenetic," the individual and the species.

In the case of narrative, Northrop Frye came closest to duplicating this dynamic with his four literary genres, comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire. These could be rounded into a cycle whose upper half constituted a heroic arc from rise to fall, a negational state of melancholy/satire, and a rebirth that began at a melancholic stasis but concluded with a wedding as symbolic rebirth. Elegantly, each step borrowed from and depended on the others. Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*

examined metaphor from the level of structure down to the details of speeches and actions, and in this duplicated the spirit of Vico's and Cassirer's "successive+contemporary" system of metaphoric substrates. Of course, Ricoeur makes no mention of Frye or meta-theory, despite the fact that, or possibly because, they are about emplotment rather than pure temporal structure. The idea of atmosphere is built into meta-theory but pulled into sharp focus with Frye's four forms, which are about places as much as plots and actions. Frye even considered that there would be a lapidary aspect of his system, with fiery diamonds contrasting with dark coal, sparkling phosphorus, and crumbling shale and sand. Because stories involve everything, space and the objects in space are critical parts.

A critique of Ricoeur's failure to assess architecture would be pointless, since Ricoeur seems unable to grasp the difference between physical buildings and the architecture that animates them. And, because this review is intended to be about study methods, it should not be a negative review but, instead, a positive program. As much as we might learn by dissecting Ricoeur's shortcomings and rhetorical strategy, the issue at hand is how do we learn from film, art, literature, and popular culture in general to ground whatever investigations we undertake in the name of architecture theory? Implicitly, we should not be limited to any particular domain. It is possible that almost any art form, any work of art, any human event or condition, offers theory new opportunities. What are the methods by which we are able to convert these everyday phenomenon into resources for theory? What lessons do they teach? How do they tell us, in fact, things we need to know, when at present we are not even aware of their existence?

Vico's Method of Surprise

The genius of *The New Science* has two parts. First is the theory of metaphor that argues that the human mentality came about in a sudden moment of realization that was technically a fiction. Humans, unaware of their own animalistic nature, imputed this nature to objects and elements of the external world. Although it was they who were fierce, they attributed fierceness to the sky when it thundered and issued lightning. Although it was they who were physical and intemperate, they attributed these qualities to animals, objects, natural forces, and landscape elements. In short, the world became a mirror without the first humans having the least idea that the qualities they saw in nature were, in fact, their own. The not only lacked reflection in the sense of the mentally sophisticated ability to question their own thoughts, they could not comprehend the way the world reflected their own nature. The world was *expressive*, but the fact of reflection and transference made this expression appear as an implacable power. As the historian Varro said, religion was born in fear. Myth was originally the response to this fear in the development of the practices of divination; the involvement of fire and sacrifice focused on the communal fire, the primary place and architecture of the first religions and the households that confined and sheltered them. Divination practices laid the groundwork for the next development, representational thinking. Auspices were interpreted first as absolute dictates and followed literally. As they became more intricate and sophisticated, human response to the demands of the



Figure 2. Piet Mondrian, *Gray Tree*, 1911, canvas on a board, 78.5 × 107.5 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Netherlands. A part of a series of paintings moving gradually from a perspectival figure separated from a background, the gray tree gradually achieves a homeostasis with the “non-tree” space showing, on the canvas, between its branches and trunk, the picture plane in effect bringing the background into the same plane as the figure. This parallax sequence, where depth is reduced to zero, was clearly in Mondrian’s mind as he sought to show the depth function in terms of a point of perfect balance, a convergence of figure and ground equivalent to the flat surface of representation.

auspices became more nuanced. “Work-arounds” developed so that the gods would not be displeased. The sacraments of marriage and burial involved such work-arounds. With the evolution of the hero and consolidation of heroics into the idea of kingship, oracular laws were gradually secularized and the limited rule of the family and clan could extend to the town and city.

This is the historic sequence, the “successive” aspect of Vico’s evolutionary schema. What about the “contemporary” component? In a visual experiment, the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian produced a series of paintings of trees in various states of spatial flattening, decreasing the graphic difference between figure and ground (Fig. 3). In moving from a three-dimensional effect to the point where the tree was barely distinguishable as an object as it merged with a general

pattern, Mondrian was in effect creating a stereogram that converted depth parallax to a “flat parallax.”⁸ The relation of depth perception to motion and muscular focus was diminished step by step, removing the idea of binary opposition of 3-d space to the 2-d plane. There were, as it were, a smooth gradient between the two, but the final effect of a perfect balance between the object and its background was suppressed or delayed until the viewer “suddenly” saw the transition.

Mondrian made the role of sequence clear by painting the gray tree in a series of gradually “dissolved” states. But, in effect, he was *reversing* the sequence by which perception first distinguishes a figure from a ground. He returned the viewer to the “ground-zero” moment when the tree had not yet been cut away from its background, not yet been associated with a profile, a line *cutting away* the object which is nearer from that which is further away.

In perception, the distinction between figure and ground seems to happen instantaneously, as if the eye and brain rush to the conclusion of the process, suppressing any memory of the initial experience of figure–ground equality. Yet, the end result attests to this sequence, in that the object is said to “stand out,” “*pro-ject*,” or advance. Any movement of the point of view confirms this

⁸ A stereogram, or “autostereogram,” is a flat pattern that, if seen by eyes focused on infinity, reveals a hidden shape thanks to slight differences in the resulting overlap of the design. See “Autostereogram,” *Wikipedia* March 16, 2004), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autostereogram>

movement along the sagittal (viewer to viewed) line. If the viewer is paralyzed and monocular, the scene remains flat. Once the point of view is doubled (binocularity) or the viewer moves, objects that are closer immediately pop forward from the ground behind them.

This rather complicated way of describing 3-space juxtaposes the process of succession that Mondrian played out in his reversed full-to-flat sequence of gray trees. The end result, where the background reaches a point of equilibrium in the spaces between the branches and the branches seem to be fractures in the tessellated space behind them, returns us to the beginning of the perceptual experience, where fracture is the first moment of creating a figure-ground difference. *But, the sequence, which must exist, is denied.* Perception accepts the 3-d placement of the tree in front of a ground lying at a distance behind it as visual reality, attributing the flat equality of figure and ground to its own subjectivity, a dream from which it has awoken. From flat to 3-d, Mondrian has depicted the relation of subjectivity to objectivity and, in the same process, the relation of subject to object.

Can we generalize to the relation of other kinds of sequence? Is there always a succession, a gradual increase of distance, in every construction of a “final moment” that radically opposes a subject from an object, a viewer from the viewed? Is the successive sequence really the same as the instantaneous division, which we accept as obvious and given? Is the constructive addition equal to the sudden realization of difference? The former is temporal, the latter spatial. Mondrian seems to have proven that, not only is the temporal process *intrinsic* to the spatial division, but that time and space itself are one and the same. He has removed a dimension, from 3-d to 2-d, to create a tessellated merger of figure and ground, returning us to the zero-degree of perception, but in this experiment he has shown how every conception of spatial simultaneity — for space is nothing if not the simultaneous existence of all the objects and relations within it — is in fact a *construct* involving temporal sequence.

Vico of course is not painting trees. He is trying to describe the curious coincidence in the development of different cultures in different geographical locations that always begin with the same kind of institutions, always develop other institutions to take their place, and always end at the same state. Amos Funkenstein has called this sequence “secularization,” in that cultures begin with an intensely religious view of the natural world, gradually replace the gods behind appearances with reasons for why things happen and appear the way they do, and end with a mentality that regards the principles as superior to their effects.⁹ Vico’s appreciation for this pattern of “gods, heroes, and (ordinary) humans” is really the fall of the humans themselves who, unable to conceive of themselves as divine, attribute divinity to everything around them, demons or gods that are not only different from them but withhold their knowledge and intentions. The “thoughts” of the gods must be stolen back, and in this we have the myth of Prometheus, who initiates the practices of divination and localizes the power of fire at the point of the family

⁹ Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2018).

hearth, presided over by Hestia, whose human representatives are the female members of the household.

Why, Vico asks, should cultures separated from each other by historic time and geographic space, have anything in common, let alone go through an identical *sequence* of mental “atmospheres”? Vico went further, to suggest that this developmental sequence, played out at the scale of cultural stages stretching over centuries, was also the necessary sequence of stages by which the child develops into the adult, and on an even smaller scale, how the individual perceives the world in perceptual “moments” that also involve stages, from a minimal distinction of figure-ground to a fully three-dimensional perceived world. Vico’s successive+contemporary idea, replicated in Mondrian’s gray tree experiment, demonstrated how the “incomprehensible” combination of a gradual process with a sudden reality was converted into the experience of surprise.

At the personal level, surprise is the astonishment at a sudden inexplicable coincidence of opposites. What is impossible is that A and not-A could be the same. As impossible as the logic may be, we experience this coincidence whenever love turns to hate, success becomes failure, joy becomes depression. The shock comes from the fact that these changes are not gradual but, often, sudden, to the extent that it seems that the opposite element was inside “all along,” that as nice as Dr. Jekyll seemed to be, there was a Mr. Hyde lurking within, and that the *nicer* Jekyll seemed to be, his double seemed to gain in equal power, as if Jekyll and Hyde were a single zero-sum entity.

If the figure and ground are a single zero-sum entity, Mondrian’s experiment is equivalent to Vico’s zero-sum claim about human cultures, human individuals, and experiential moments. They are “successive and contemporaneous” because time and space are not different, as we seem to think when we distinguish the contemporaneous “facts” of space and the clearly successive “facts” of time. *As soon as* there is space, there is time; or, equally, *as soon as* there is time, there is space. We could extend this argument to Ricœur’s distinction of architecture and narrativity, to say that “as soon as architecture, there is narrativity” and “as soon as there is narrativity, there is architecture,” with emphasis on *as soon as*. The opposition of architecture and narrativity, on the grounds that the former is spatial and the latter temporal, is really an argument for their reciprocity and co-identity — “co-identity” meaning that as soon as one comes into existence fully, so does the other, each in aid of the other.

Vico seems to be talking mostly about sequence: the *history* of nations (cultures), the *history* of the child’s development into an adult and then the adult’s maturation and death, the *history* of perceptual moments. But, he is also implicitly talking about space as structure, i. e. architecture. In fact it is spatial difference — the distinction between the subject and the world — that effects the mental transfer of agency from subject to object, with the suppression of any knowledge of that transfer required to empower the object with its “mental powers.”

This combination of succession and simultaneity and, hence, time and space *or* narrativity and architecture is almost uniquely Vichian and Lacanian; furthermore, both thinkers, Vico at the

level of history and Lacan at the level of the individual subject, ground this conjunction of opposites in the logic of metaphor. Is it not curious that Ricœur (1) rejects the possibility of conjunction in order to present his own argument for “possible connections” between architecture and narrativity and (2) omits both Vico and Lacan, who are famous for their theories of metaphor, from his supposedly exhaustive study of the subject? It is possible that Ricœur knew of Vico but not probable that he studied him to any extent.¹⁰ However, Ricœur not only knew Lacan, his relationship was problematic. Ricœur attended some of Lacan’s lectures but expressed discomfort and confusion. His son, in contrast, was an avid follower of Lacan’s lectures and writings and was an enthusiastic Lacanian.¹¹ The project of connecting Ricœur to Vico is, thus, hypothetical, using middle-men such as Gadamer, while there is no project to connect Ricœur to Lacan, knowing that the disconnection was public and widely known. We can proceed to think, at least tentatively, that while Vico and Lacan are “on the same page” with respect to metaphor, Ricœur is not only on a different page but writing a different book. In the cases where Ricœur’s theory of metaphor is found lacking, Vico and/or Lacan offer reasonable alternatives, the latter for the case of the general subject, presumed to be modern, the former for the full span of subjectivity up to and including not only the modern subject but the modern subject’s experiential “moments.” Following the model of Mondrian’s gray trees, both Vico and Lacan discover or invent the conception of a second parallax, one that can be “re-enacted” through art that involves the model of the stereogram.

From Theories of Narrative to Actual Narratives: Going to the Movies

Is parallax something we can talk about as a part of narrativity? Is it even something we can talk about in architecture? For the latter, at least there is the relevancy of space, conceived first in terms of the depth perception of an ordinary parallax (the use of binocularity and motion to establish spatial relations). Mondrian’s experiments with the gray trees, however, point to a second kind of parallax where figure and ground are returned to equilibrium, a flat pattern of tessellations, where the profile of an object is barely discernible. This is Vico (and Cassirer’s) first moment of differentiation, where the “expressive function” is felt through tensions and

¹⁰ In his lucid essay on the relation of Vico and Ricœur on the subject of theological origins of thought, Philip J. Chmielewski offers no insight into Ricœur’s actual knowledge of Vico’s works. Rather, he compares the two thinkers on the basis of Vico’s concept of *sensus communis* but, instead of Vico’s version of this, substitutes Gadamer’s, which is distinctively at odds with Vico’s idea of “thought without reflection.” This is the important ability of the human subject to respond quickly to threatening situations where taking time to think would lower the chance of survival. Instead, humans are able to employ a sense-based reflex that is able to be both intelligent and immediate. Gadamer’s idea of *sensus communis* is, like Ricœur’s, based on the idea of an evolved ethical core of “good practices” in service of the common good. The accumulation of such a repository aligns with Ricœur’s notion of a “natural attitude” of shared beliefs and values, not Vico’s concept of instantaneous though witty action. See Philip J. Chmielewski, “Toward an Ethics of Production: Vico and Analogy, Ricoeur and Imagination,” *Philosophy and Theology* 9, 3 (1996): 389–418. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1972). For a critique of Gadamer’s misrepresentation of Vico’s *sensus communis*, see John D. Shaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham NC: Duke University, 1990).

¹¹ See Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Company: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925–1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990) for anecdotes about Lacan’s relation to Ricœur.

compressions, fractures and fault lines. It is the movement from zero to the first something that indicates the presence and potentiality of an object without specifying anything about distance or size. It is a moment of pure anxiety. Subsequent opening of this primal fractures depends on the other side of the word *tempo* — from time to atmosphere.

Northrop Frye and others have formalized the idea of atmosphere to follow the cycle of the living and dead hero. The rise (from birth) and subsequent fall (to death) happens above a horizon beneath which a single domain (of melancholy) re-connects the end to the beginning. This zone is timeless, both in religious traditions about the spacetime of whatever follows death and in the logical sense of time itself as identified with mortality, as in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Time Must Have a Stop*. Is eternity temporal or a-temporal? Is the question itself addressable? Architectural models of Hades employ fractals and palindromes to suggest that motion in Hades is an illusion in that it is self-cancelling, futile. Just as the palindrome maintains a single value (12345/54321 maintains 6 at all points of its sequence), a back-and-forth movement is always

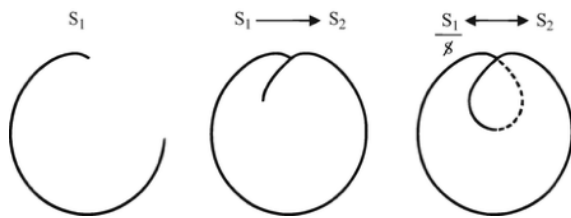


Figure 3. Lacan employed the figure of the interior-8 to model the sequence of the Master Signifier (S_1), the “structure” or “paradigm” of language/thought, followed by the production of (metonymic) signifying chains (S_2), to be linked back, metaphorically, to the subject suppressed by the Master Signifier ($S_1/\$$). In short, metaphor involves a “vertical” suppression of the source of a relationship, the subject, in order to produce a “horizontal” succession of signifying relationships. The projective shape known as the cross-cap presents this model as a topology able to be both continent (the bottom of the form) and incontinent, the top that behaves like a Möbius strip.

system of humors is actually like the interior-8, this would account for the way that Hades, a mythic-religious category, can narrativize the fact that negation itself has been negated. The first negation is that of the finite rise and fall of the mortal, the birth, life, and death of the hero. The second negation is the opposite of this finitude, a domain where any sequence is equalized/neutralized by a mirroring function such as that of the 12345/54321 self-intersecting but non-orientable sequences. Just as the Möbius band involves a twist that reduces its three-dimensionality to a two-dimensional plane surface with one side and one edge, Hades reduces the

return, a repetition. This suggests that the birth-to-death sequence of mortality is also a kind of palindrome, but here the up and down of emergence, success, and failure is expanded to an arc in the style of the rising and setting sun, where antipodal positions of east and west stand for first and last things.

The ancients could only speculate about what happened to the setting sun. Night involved a palindromic mystery of how something that disappeared on one side of the universe would appear at the opposite side in morning. The idea of a circuit was complicated by the idea that the sun's return at dawn would involve a reversal at the level of the watery horizon connecting sanguine birth with phlegmatic death. We can draw this circuit as an “interior-8,” a small circle inscribed within larger one, suggesting that the reverse action is implicit within the main motion (Fig. 3). If the

hero's three-dimensionality, his association with quest-oriented travel (think of Odysseus, Aeneas, or Don Quixote), to the two-dimensional plane whose architectural paradigm is the Thesean labyrinth.

The Thesian labyrinth is a fractal structure whose ABA pattern of folds can be extended, $A_{ABA}B_{ABA}A_{ABA}$ *ad infinitum*, although we rarely see it past the first iteration. It is incontinent (there is no physical partition of inside from outside) and therefore “Hades-like.” But, the wanderer can be confused about which direction is inside or outside. The knowledge that there is no physical gate compounds the terror induced by doubt, and Ariadne's thread is the only solution, without which the alternation between centrifugal and centripetal loops induces a kind of lateral vertigo, where to go outside one feels as if one is going inside, and *vice versa* — i. e. the perfect architectural palindrome.

Melancholy is associated both with mourning and satire. Curiously, the annual contests of Greek playwrights specified that a tragedy should be followed by a farce or satyr play. The ambiguity of satire is such that many modern critics mistook Euripides' *Alcestis* for a tragedy, when anyone who understands its comedic conclusion cannot make this error. In everyday experience, the difference between tragedy and farce can be minimal. We say, “I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.” Indeed. Many people cry at weddings and, embarrassingly, laugh at funerals. The response is not thoughtful or reasonable but automatic. The same emotional circuitry that allows us to “decide” instantaneously whether to flee or stand and fight can get its wires crossed in the palindromic situations of extreme grief or happiness. Both laughter and crying are convulsions, an effort to expel feeling that has been trapped within the body. At the same time, they are public signs of grief or happiness, not formed intentionally as much as by involuntary instinct. The lesson convulsion teaches us is that, at some level, grief and happiness are the same thing. We are in the zone — *Hades* — where negation itself is negated. In the same way that dreams allow the dead to reappear as if alive, many objects can be condensed into one and the spirit of one can be displaced elsewhere, to a “haunted host.” Two logics are collapsed, as Freud taught: condensation and displacement are two aspects of the uncanny, the reversal of scale order as the many pack in to fit inside the one, and the reversal of the rule of spatial difference, where one thing can be in two places at the same time. Vico's rule of “successive + contemporaneous” itself transfers to the dream condition of condensation and displacement, where multiple contexts are “packed in” to a single conceptual container, a rule that proves itself.

In themselves these ideas are complicated and confusing. We need to look at actual narratives, narratives that involve spatiality both in terms of physical scenery but also cinematic blocking. Film is a medium that appears on a 2-d surface. This is not simply the screen hung at the blank end of an auditorium, allowing the audience to occupy the position of “the fourth wall” where once the director, camera, and crew had stood. It is radically 2-d in that the frame of the screen plays multiple functions. First, it is the seeming limit of the optical film, the edge beyond which camera motion and editing make it into being nothing more than an arbitrary practical limit of

the spectator's view. As with a three-dimensional cube that presents only a front that requires us to walk around it to see the other sides, the frame of the cinema screen requires the camera to do the moving for us while we are instructed to remain motionless in the dark auditorium. *In other words, the spatiality of film is implicit in its temporality of figure-ground relationships.*

Scene sequence is simultaneously temporal (by definition) and spatial; but because the "space" of film is constructed as a composite virtuality, it is implicitly an architecture. Architecture is analogous to the "atmosphere" of the story, the $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ in Figure 3, the "plan" that directs the sequence of actions, speeches, and shots where the "subject" (the audience) is commanded to sit still, the bar across the S, or \$ in Lacan's notation of the interior-8 condition. At this point we should notice that the theater building itself is akin to the interior-8. It, like the labyrinth, is both "all-inside" and "all-outside." Unlike other buildings, it converts itself by turning on and off the house lights to create the binary condition of fiction-*versus*-reality. The "surprise factor" is evident. The spectacle first surprises us with its fictive luminosity and spatiality, its architectural design. Then the spectacle as story must surprise us in order to conclude with a satisfying ending. If the end is not surprising, we say that the narrative sequence of scenes has failed to form into a story. It has failed to "round itself" in the sense that for every story, to be a story, the ending must "answer to" the beginning.¹²

Retroaction, evident in the shape of the story, is native to human communication, where the beginning of the sentence cannot be known until the end is reached, at which point what has been remembered of the beginning must be revised but not totally erased. In the same way, a story is palindromically retroactive when, at the point of conclusion, we remember the clues that had been given at the beginning. If there is no relation, we say that the story didn't make sense. If there is a strong sense of "identity in difference," a case of $A=A$ in the face of the evidence that $A \neq A$ or $A = \sim A$, there is satisfaction that the story has done all that it should do, that it is complete; that there is nothing more to be said; now is the time for silence.

Ricœur does not mention the role of silence in narrativity, but it is essential. "Silence," "retroaction," and even "completion" cannot be found anywhere in the text. Yet, narratologists no less important than Roland Barthes say that these are essential ingredients of anything purporting to be a story. With the reader's permission, I will end my critique of Ricœur by dismissing his essay as unscholarly, unreasonable, and irrelevant. Without mentioning that Ricœur seems not to know the difference between architecture in building, and reduces narrative to time and architecture to space in order to suggest tentative connections drawn from Heidegger, Bakhtin, and Benjamin, I can rest my case on the same grounds as might be used to dismiss his book on metaphor, namely that he seems unwilling or unable to include references that are not just central but indispensable.

¹² I thank Dan Collins for identifying this idea, whose original source is Roland Barthes, "Deux femmes," in Éric Marty, ed. *Œuvres complètes 3* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 1052–1054. Cited in Dan Collins, "Stealing Money from Offices," *Lacunæ* 16 (July 2016): 105–124.



Figure 4. Three film clips demonstrate the principles of narratology and architecture *via* the conjunction of sequentiality and simultaneity. In Huston’s version of James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” the pivotal moment of the story occurs as Gretta descends the stair just as a tenor is singing a familiar tune. *Babettes Feast* ends with a banquet captioned by a speech on the (im-)possibility of completion, and the opening scene in Elster’s office of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* sets up the story of the film to come. While it’s a good idea to watch the whole of these films, these clips focus on the essence of story-telling and reveal how narrative has an implicit architecture and *vice versa*.

Film Scenes for Study

On behalf of the subject of retroaction and the architecture of the screen-based presentation, I would like to use three examples of filmic narrative:

- John Huston’s 1987 film, *The Dead*, taken from James Joyce’s short story of the same name. One scene in particular illustrates how the paradigm of suppression of the subject works both at the level of the audience and the level of the story. This is the scene where Gabriel’s wife Gretta pauses on the landing of a staircase as the couple are leaving the party. A tenor who had before refused to sing on this musical evening on account a cold finally acceded to his host’s requests, and his song can be heard coming from the room above. It is the same song Gretta’s would-be lover from her early youth had sung to persuade her not to return to her convent school in Dublin but to stay with him. Singing in the cold rain, the lover caught pneumonia and died, and the song brings back this painful memory. Huston’s blocking of this scene compresses the whole story into a single scene, making the staircase a “memory place” in the sense of Simonides.¹³
- Final banquet scene, Gabriel Axel’s 1987 Danish film, *Babettes Feast* (*Babettes Gæstebud*). Here, the mystery of the refugee Babette, who has been given asylum by two maiden sisters in

¹³ See Don Kunze, “Cloud Nine: A Lover’s Guide,” in Paul Emmons, Jodi LaCoe, and Federica Goffi, eds., *Ceilings and Dreams: the Architecture of Levity* (New York and Abington, OX: Routledge, 2020), 17–27. The story of Simonides in Cicero’s version differs from that given by Frances Yates’ in *The Art of Memory*. Simonides begins his famous story at a celebration where he is already able to employ an “art of memory places,” memorizing the names of each guest by where they sit. After the hall’s collapse, he is able to use these stored places to identify the crushed bodies of the victims, enabling their burial; it is at this point that he realizes the *structure* of the art of memory, which involves the mystery by which identification is able to release the soul of the dead from its mortal body. This greater mystery is embodied by the story’s chiasmic structure, where each scene of the first half is mirrored by a scene in the second half, a logic of “two-into-one.”

a religious community on the island of the western coast of Jutland in the late 1800s, is revealed through the dinner she cooks in appreciation of the sisters' hospitality. This is a chiasmus realized by General Lorens Löwenhielm, who gives a speech quoting a passage from the Bible concerning the complex wholeness that comes about through Fate and loss.¹⁴

- Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1957) involves several key ideas and scenes critical to story-telling. The first use of this film will be assisted by Shayan Reet Bhuiya's "How Hitchcock Blocks a Scene," www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPsGeNy6Zk8.¹⁵ Here you will be able to compare the story virtues of retroaction, silence, and completeness/roundness to what actually happens on the screen — how scenes are blocked in terms of the objects placed in the set, the virtualities imagined to surround the set, the placement of actors, and the length and editing of the scene components. Here it will be good to remember Mondrian's gray tree experiment, Vico/Lacan's idea of successive + contemporaneous, and the relation of ontology to ontogeny — three short scenes that are like short dreams, compressed yet portable.

The goal of this reading list assignment is to see "atmosphere" in both spatial and temporal ways but to move quickly beyond the idea that architecture is about space and narrativity is about time. Although it is easy to disprove this simplistic reductionism, it is not easy to form a useful critical-theoretical alternative. Reading Vico and Lacan is both too much to ask and an inefficient way of considering the proper options. Even consideration of Northrop Frye's catalog of narrative options would be counterproductive and misleading.

The idea will be to watch the scenes listed above, find logical rather than superficial connections, and then articulate principles of narrative + architecture on the grounds of sequence and simultaneity, knowing in advance that they are about the *necessity* of temporal extension *in the face of* the visible world, a necessity that is, by definition, architecture.



¹⁴ General Löwenhielm's speech, though Biblical in its sourcing, identifies a principle in mathematics known as the "Hamiltonian," an inventory of all the energies involved in a circuit, including those that are latent, antinomous, and even missing.

¹⁵ There are several YouTube videos on Hitchcock's scene-blocking in *Vertigo*; others are useful but make sure to watch this one.