

Thaumotropic *Vertigo*¹

Don Kunze



Figure 1. Flower shop scene, *Vertigo*, 1958. Private detective Scottie Ferguson spies on the heiress “Madeleine.” The honest detective doesn’t suspect that she is actually an actress hired to play Madeleine until the end of the film. He comes to believe that she is haunted by the ghost of a deceased ancestor whose own suicide 100 years before is driving her to do the same, a centenary re-enactment. The view of this shot superimposes a “scopic” 360° panopticism onto the detective’s 180° parallax, thanks to the mirror on the door.

Although Jacques Lacan rarely if ever cited films or film-making in his extensive lectures, his work was nonetheless the basis for decades of film theorizing. Psychoanalysis revolutionized the relation of the film to the film-viewer, not just in terms of interpretation or reception but affective-emotive response: how films went beyond thinking to achieve, within the realm of feeling, an intelligibility. This accomplishment is nowhere as potentially useful as in Hitchcock’s 1958 masterpiece, *Vertigo*, where the film’s logic relies on Lacan’s distinction of optics and scopics: how, in the parallax of what meets the eye, there is something more — or rather *less* — a less that is paradoxically generative (Fig. 1).

Binocular vision is able to measure distance and, thence, can tell us whether

to flee, stand and fight, or play dead. It is the parallax realm where we are, more often than not, shamed and humiliated. The scopic, in contrast, gauges a different kind of fear, a fear inexplicably saturated with shame’s twin, guilt. The scopic overlaps 180° parallax with a 360° panoptical sensibility. In its ethnological form, the evil eye’s gaze invades situations where surplus has tempted pride to outrun prudent shame. The gaze, wishing to level the playing field, strikes back. Cultures everywhere strive to protect beautiful children, lucky windfalls, or other gifts of fortune. The evil eye’s overlapping of optics by scopics can be boiled down to this: we fear of retribution from panoptical others who, even though they may be nowhere to be seen, see us and our wealth and feel envy as soon as we feel pleasure; thence, our shame converts to guilt. The precise coincidence of guilt with envy tempts us to use the word “quantum,” because this is nothing less than a spooky correspondence.

The gaze is there because it’s not. As Picasso famous portrait of Celestina teaches, it’s the *blind* eye that’s the effective one. Thanks to this defining absence, the scopic rules over the invisibilities subtracted by our view. Where visibility ends, a perfect shadow begins, out of which

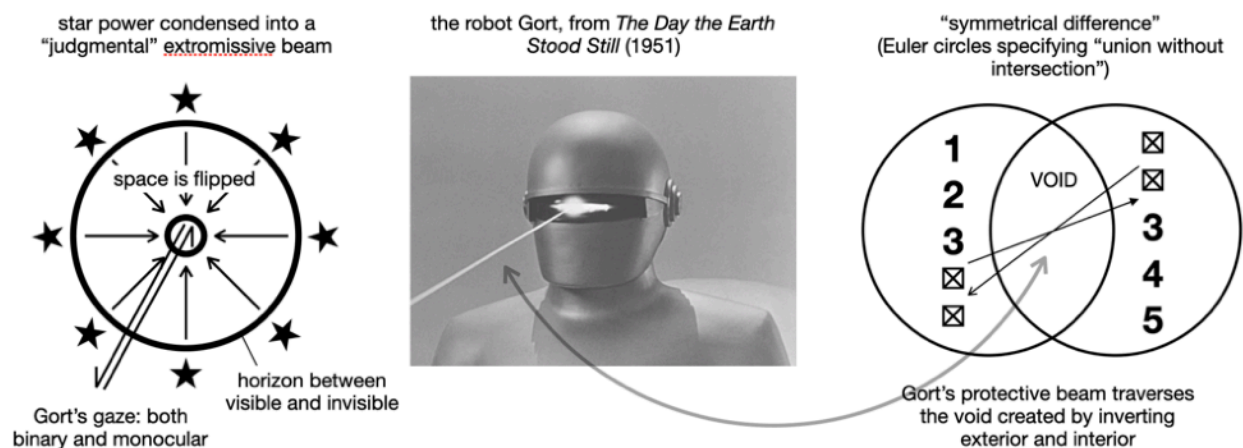


Figure 2. The condition of symmetrical difference, “union without intersection,” of two Euler circles describes the bifurcated extromissive gaze of the robot Gort in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. This diagrams a truth-telling function represented by the void between the two circles. As a cut, the void is defined by the spaces on either side, chiralistic faces which resist further reduction, a true case of Lacan’s term for the intimate exterior, *extimité*.

a corrective panoptical gaze overwrites our parallax views. It condenses the energy of this shadow into an extromissive “smart beam” able to target precisely whatever it must destroy. Popular culture grasps this idea immediately. This is the precision space-ray shot from the monocular Gort, the robot who protected the margin around the space-ship from the Federation of Galaxies sent to warn earth of impending doom in the 1951 film, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Fig. 2).² It struck the weapons of the soldiers surrounding the landing site without harming them otherwise. The subjectivity of the gaze was its objectivity, its ability to target the precise thing that caused offense, the *surplus object about which the soldiers should be made ashamed*.

The selectivity of Gort’s extromissive gaze revealed a geometric secret. The protective beam created its own space of operational effectiveness at the same time it cut through parallax space. The rim of the horizon created as a central void that acted as a condenser. Gort’s line of fire was simultaneously intro- and extro-missive, a defense and an offense, able to distinguish good and evil (Kunze, 2020). Its energetics compressed the radiant power of the stars set around visibility’s circular horizon.

If we allow the full visual range to be abbreviated as 360°, there are two psychoanalytically significant paradigms about dividing it into two 180° regions. The first is the subject as a viewer who can only see what’s in front. The other 180° model is the mirror, which returns a left-right reversed scene in exchange for the right-left scene it cancels. For the half-blind subject, the bar dividing it (\$) also produces two chiralistic faces that differ by the chiralistic relation of the agent to the product, where the product looks back at the agent with an extromissive gaze. The bar is

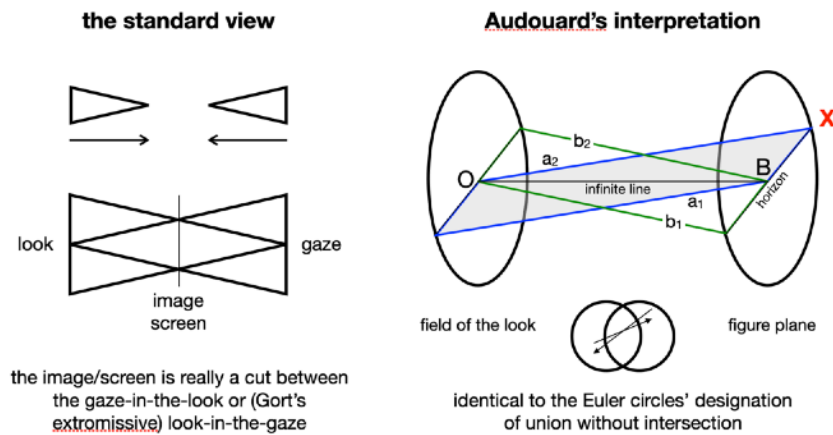


Figure 3. Xavier Audouard (Lacan 1965–66, 214–16) revised the standard view of Lacan’s diagram of the look and gaze by asserting the primary role of the cut at the position of the image/screen (left diagram), producing two chiralistic faces (right), where symmetrically opposite parallelograms crossed to create a chiasmus of viewpoints and horizons. Drawing by author.

also a split, then expanded, bi-polarized void: from $\$$ to $S||S$ and then $S|\rightleftharpoons|S$. In Lacan’s famous diagram of the look at the gaze, presented in Seminar XI (1981, 106), the look’s view of the gaze and the gaze’s view of the look are not obvious if portrayed as two overlapping triangles (Fig.3, left). Most readers have imagined the gaze-look relation in terms of opposed and superimposed cones of vision. But, as Xavier Audouard pointed out when he spoke at session 18 of Lacan’s Seminar XIII (*The Object of Psychoanalysis*) on May 18, 1966, this is not a case of simple reversal and superimposition. Audouard envisioned two crossed parallelograms, one stretching from the what he called the plane of the look to the plane of the figure, another stretching out in the opposite direction (Lacan, 1965–66). These stretches are symmetrically different, but not just *with* a difference, but rather *because of* a difference — a *cut* that is both primary and primal, a logical cause of the gaze and look as opposed forces.

Audouard envisioned these planes as inward-facing chiralistic surfaces generated from a “primordial” single slice at the line of the traditional diagram’s “image-screen.” Audouard did not represent this as a line. Why? The cut created a void, and the void created the opposed, chiastic faces of the look and figure. There can be no graphic representation of the image-screen. There can only be the opposed faces of the look and figure, L_F and F_L , with only a connecting infinite line.³ These faces would be the only material evidence of the cut. Like the Real, the cut-as-void would resist symbolization.⁴

Seeing the difference between the standard version of two superimposed triangles (Fig. 3, left) and two crossed parallelograms (Fig. 3, right) requires a kind of tangram-perceptiveness, but the advantage is that Audouard’s diagram, despite the faults that Lacan found with it, duplicates the logic of the Euler circles’ union without intersection and introduces the idea of a primary cut to replace Seminar XI’s image-screen line. This distinction between optics and scopics could be

shown to be, paradoxically, *logically* prior to the subject's *first historical* emergence at the point of the Mirror Stage. More important, if we can envisage *space itself* as emerging from just such a primal cut/distinction, it could be argued that the Mirror Stage and the subject's own split between parallax and panoptical sensibilities repeats this primal logic out of a kind of cosmic necessity.

The scopics/optics split — a revisionary interpretation of the subject as \$ — necessitates the idea of continual dynamic antagonism. Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo* is an encyclopedia of this dynamics. This relation embodies what Freud called the *einziger Zug* and Lacan called it the *unary* trait.⁵

What is unary? Freud's Dora had a little cough that she had unconsciously picked up from her father (Freud, 1905). As a physiological symptom, the cough belonged to *both* Dora and her father, but as a psychoanalytical symptom it belonged to neither; rather, *they belonged to the cough*. The cough was thus collective as well as unconscious and indifferent to linear time lapse.

Scopics v. Optics in *Vertigo*

The unary trait's reversal, its possession of the subject who would have it for a symptom, structures the first half of *Vertigo*, thanks to the overlay of scopics and optics. A police detective, Scottie Ferguson, retires after a traumatic near-death accident during a roof-top chase. A uniformed officer had fallen to his death trying to save Scottie from falling, and the shame of someone dying in his place haunts him. This is pushed to the background when an ex-college friend, Gavin Elster, a shipping magnate, hires Scottie to spy on his beautiful heiress wife, Madeleine. Elster directs Scottie specifically to monitor her obsession with Carlotta Valdes, an ancestress who had committed suicide precisely a century before. Madeleine seems intent on marking this centennial with her own suicide. Scottie does not realize that his *optic* capture of Madeleine is really a *scopic* capture of him, a capture that has already taken his vertigo into account and planned a scam around it. Neither he nor the movie audience yet realize that Madeleine is a fake, played by Judy Barton, Elster's lover. The con plans for Scottie to fall in love with Madeleine after he saves her from a faked suicide jump in the San Francisco Bay.

Scottie's heroics structure his failure to prevent her from a second suicide attempt. This will be staged at a restored Spanish mission an hour's drive south of the city. Elster knows that Scottie's vertigo will prevent him from climbing to the top of the bell tower, allowing Elster time to kill the real Madeleine and throw her identically dressed body off the top. When Scottie sees a woman falling wearing the same dress Judy was wearing, he will believe her to be Madeleine. The guilt he felt when a "uniformed officer" fell to save him will magically transfer to this second case where a "uniform" has made possible a sacrificial substitute. The "uniform" idea detaches guilt

from its material circumstances. Free to float, it reattaches to Scottie's vertigo, which intensifies into a nervous breakdown.

Scottie's guilt about the former officer's sacrifice — his version of Dora's cough — carries over into this second fall. The unary trait makes his testimony all the more effective at the inquest. The magistrate scolds him for failing to climb the stairs. Scottie's guilt confirms this charge, pushing the question of suicide into second place.

The trait's ability to be collective follows the logic that subjects don't have symptoms, symptoms have subjects. With this reversal, a trait can be shared and still maintain its identity. This is what happens to Judy/Madeleine, foreshadowed by Madeleine/Carlotta. This is the structure of *Vertigo's* second part.

How Judy Should Look More Like Herself

After the inquest, Elster disappears; Scottie suffers a nervous breakdown. Still shaky after treatment, he runs into a woman in downtown San Francisco who bears a remarkable resemblance to Madeleine. It is the actress Judy Barton, now a shopgirl after being abandoned by Elster, but neither the audience nor Scottie immediately realize this. Scottie, intrigued by Judy's resemblance to Madeleine, proposes to support her on the condition that she will allow him to re-make her, even when she learns that his aim is to reconstruct the "original" Madeleine. As the audience gradually becomes aware of circular irony, that Judy actually *was* this Madeleine, tension builds from of Scottie's blindness to this fact. Even those in the audience who suppress this realization feel its effects.

Scottie achieves his Pygmalion goal once Judy gives in to his demand that she fix her hair exactly like Madeleine's, following the design of Carlotta's portrait in the Legion of Honor Museum. She emerges from her bathroom transformed, stepping through a green portal that duplicates the shape of Euler circle's "union without intersection." The path from Judy to Madeleine crosses the void of symmetrical difference with a crisscross flip that induces a Catch-22. She is no longer the shopgirl with a touch of Madeleine's class, J_M . But, then we see the twin of this. The now-classy woman, M , will have a fatal touch of her former self, M_J .

Judy forgetfully picks out a necklace to wear to as the couple go out to celebrate at the restaurant where they first "met." It is a memento of her criminal conspiracy. Scottie immediately recognizes the jewel as the same necklace worn by Carlotta in her portrait in the Legion of Honor Museum. Stolen from the real Madeleine's jewelry case, this had authenticated the actress Judy in her regular pilgrimages to the painting. This scene is shot to leave no doubt that the jewel is gazing at Scottie, scopically, no less than the famous sardine of Seminar XI (1981) can looked at the young Lacan, in a rowboat with Petit Jean, in his personal account of the gaze's extromissive powers. With its slender beam, the jewel yells "Gotcha!" and Scottie realizes, retroactively, that he

had been the dupe of the scam: $J_M > M_J$, with the little j as the inscribed a memento of Judy's acting career. Scottie, standing behind Judy in this scene, will look across the gaze of the jewel as predicted by Audouard's diagram. The effectiveness of the scene vindicates Audouard's otherwise flawed demonstration in Seminar XIII (Lacan 1965–66, 215–16). The look and the gaze are parallelograms structured by the cut, the void, which in *Vertigo* was the structure of the con: a rim separating Judy from Madeleine, a profile casting a perfect shadow from each woman, a shadow shooting across a void where there was “structure and nothing but structure” — structure that had Scottie to do what the scam demanded by thinking this was his own desire.

From the rooftop chase scene to the final crossed parallelograms of the look and the gaze as Scottie realized his role as the dupe when the jewel gazed out extromissively, *Vertigo* has held to the logic of the unary trait's portability, collectivity, and latency. We feel the symptom Scottie experienced as an unconscious. We do not ponder it. This makes it possible to enjoy the film, any film. The audience must know without knowing. Intellection is the enemy of suspense although it is the means by which suspense is created in the first place. Hitchcock pushes this formula to the limits. His plots are typically brainy but rely on the nucleus of the MacGuffin, the specious, even irrational, detail that the audience must swallow in order to enjoy the film.⁶ The free-floating talents of the unary trait, the way that vertigo as a symptom moves from the first rooftop-chase of the film to the final moments in the tower, are its psychoanalytical truth converted into cinematic power. We are forbidden to understand the symptom; we are required to suffer it.

Optics and Scopics Equal “Thaumatropics”

Were it not for popular culture, the unary trait would make no sense outside the clinic. Let us turn back to Exhibit One: “symmetrical difference.” In a famous O. Henry story, “The Gift of the Magi” (1905), a poor couple wish to augment the other's most prize possession (her, long hair; him, a gold watch) but destroy their own to do this. The husband sells his watch to buy an expensive comb for the hair his wife has cut to buy him a gold watch-chain. Popular culture never ceases to take advantage of the fact that humans feel shame in the parallax look, but guilt and love in the panoptical scopic domain.

If Euler circles allow us to set up a void between lists made by shame and guilt, it is so we can appreciate the void as traumatic Real, just as the poor couple realized true love through the self-cancelling gifts, given (as Lacan said) from one who does not have it to another who does not want it. The time-traveling shared unconscious, the Magi's unary gift, gives the givers just as the cough coughed the cougher. The single gift is the shared symptom that emerges out of this unconscious, out of the “nowhere” of self-cancellation.

Vertigo comes in two parts, which we could label “Madeleine_{Judy}” and “Judy_{Madeleine},” twisted across the same void that Judy twists to make Madeleine and then suffers during her own remake. Symmetrical difference is repeated so often and from so many different angles that the

Euler circles' void might be renamed "Vertigo's eye," featured in the animation accompanying the opening credits and, later, Scottie's breakdown. There are more explicit mechanical devices that directly employ the function of crisscross with the double function of rim(s) cut apart and re-annealed. The *symbolon*, a token broken by friends on parting to be rejoined on the occasion of reunion, was prefigured by an even more ancient device, the thaumatrope. The thaumatrope was a popular 19c. toy. However, thaumatropes have been found in Stone-Age caves, and the archeologists Marc Azéma and Florent Rivière (2012) have speculated that their use in hunting magic, depicting the prey's moment of death, constitutes the first form of cinema (Fig. 4, right).

Ancient hunters were said to spin the thaumatrope so that the image of the living animal and dead animal would anticipate the moment of death. The spear penetrated the animal at precisely the point where the hole in the disk allowed a chord to be twisted and released to combine the images on either side. The *symbolon* and thaumatrope were Euler-esque. The cut created a void across which images passed to anneal themselves to each other while retaining the element of pure difference. The a-temporality of the unary trait allowed the hunter's preparatory spin of the token to guide the pray to its predetermined fate. The collectivity of hunter and hunted was the unary gravity of this fate; the spin was the spear and *vice versa*.



Figure 4. The thaumatropic logic of *Vertigo* creates a unary trait by means of an optic-scopical convergence-without-overlap. The image combination "outruns" the viewer's ability to comprehend it, imposing a paralysis of judgment and corresponding impact of feeling. Source: left, Alfred Hitchcock, Dir., *Vertigo* (1958); right, M. Azéma & F. Rivière (2012).

The two images combined in the way cinema's static images run past the brain's ability to see them as static. The con ran past Scottie's parallax surveillance to produce thaumatropic love, his parallax love of Madeleine was, in a frame-by-frame analysis, the "nothing more" of the con. But, while the scam had to be *thought*, the illusion was *felt*. We see Madeleine, then Judy, then Madeleine. We do not see Judy_{Madeleine} (the actress element, the *agalma* of the shop-girl) until the spin of the jewel, appearing extromissively from the mirror, where it reflects not what was on Judy's *décolletage* but what was on Carlotta's, then Madeleine's. Then, we see the thaumatropic complement, Madeleine_{Judy} (that Madeleine was always the actress Judy, but Madeleine was "more in Judy than Judy herself"). Like Scottie, we see it, we feel it. What we see and feel runs past our

frame-by-frame power to conceptualize. We do not have the film's unary trait, the trait has us, parallel to the $-\emptyset$ of castration. In the spell of still frames running faster than our analytical sense, we do not think, we feel. The poor couple give two gifts, but the Real gift is singular and felt, the unary and thaumatropic gift of the Magi.

About the Author

Don Kunze (B.Arch., 1970, NCSU; Ph.D. Geography, 1983, Penn State University) writes about architecture's relation to psychoanalysis and topology. He is a founding member of the Institute for Psychoanalytical Studies in Architecture (2021) and active in LACK and other organizations promoting Lacanian studies of culture. He is the author of a book on Giambattista Vico.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This essay began as a series of studies undertaken with Ms. Anahita Shadkam, who at the time of this writing is completing her doctoral studies in Planning at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario. Ms. Shadkam ingeniously developed of the idea of the thaumatrope in *Vertigo*, critical to this study.
- ² The Federation spaceship landed on the Capitol Mall, Washington, D. C. In effect, the space that surrounded earth by distant galaxies was inverted; now earth-space surrounded this solitary representative of the galaxies. The conversion of the perimeter to the hollow center is nearly a literal depiction of the *extimité* of projective geometry.
- ³ This lack of a middle space translates, in terms of the syllogism, to the enthymeme, which thanks to the lack of the syllogism's customary middle term, allows the immediate transmission of idea from speaker to audience. This ancient figure of persuasion anticipated the Freudian-Lacanian unary trait by being simultaneously unconscious (the auditors were not aware of the speaker's device), shared (the idea possessed the speaker and auditors, not the other way around), and portable (the "idea" emerged spontaneously and simultaneously as an audience effect).
- ⁴ This resistance points to a key failure of "interpretation by punctuation," the substitution of meaning by paraphrase. Issues involving the Real and its definitive resistance to the Symbolic thus require "interpretation by the cut," a theoretical account of the roles of distinction and structure.
- ⁵ The unary trait plays a central role in Lacan's thinking and is cited in many places, but here I focus on the key traits of recursiveness given in Seminars XVII and XIV: the form $x = 1 + 1/x$, which relates to the Golden Section, an "isonomic" or permanent ratio value, and the relation to the trait's restorative power to make each instance a "first time" (hapax). All of these relate in some way to Dora's example suggesting the structure stemming from the trait's ability to reverse predication, allowing it to be collective, portable, and unconscious.
- ⁶ The MacGuffin's origin joke definition (*not* a weapon for trapping lions on the Scottish Highland) is a case of the logical paradox known as EFQ, *ex falso quodlibet sequitur* — that, from a false premise, anything may follow. Lacan himself cited this principle in *The Logic of Phantasy* (1966–67, 33). The MacGuffin story uses double negation to set up the void that establishes the circular structure of the story.