

# ***Lalangue for non-Lacanianians?***

Don Kunze

Architecture/art colleagues are usually not well versed in philosophy or psychoanalysis, so instead of referring to my main references, Giambattista Vico or Jacques Lacan, I have used a list of terms that relate to both architecture and critical thinking, also to perception, so that they offer ways of comparing works in different media. Some of them have been particularly useful, as in the case of the katagraphic cut, obviously essential to understanding *collège*, and the isomeric mean, without which the scene from Chaplin's film, *The Circus*, for example, would make no sense. Both of these terms relate to the kind of topology Lacan used extensively after 1970, but projective geometry is an even more demanding subject.

The terms on my list<sup>1</sup> relate to the way meaning and human communications have evolved in history, but also how the evolutionary function works in any given age, and even in any given encounter of the perceiving subject with the world. There are some over-arching concepts in both Vico's and Lacan's works that ground this set of terms and suggest that their unity as a system relates to some fundamental philosophical-ethnological principles. The one I think that is particularly useful is what Lacan calls "*lalangue*" and Vico called *vera narratio* or "silent speech." Fundamentally, this is what is left over after all of the "meaning units" of language are removed. To show what I mean, I have to use a story I can no longer give my source for, it was a segment on NPR years ago, about researchers who had developed a program to remove, from any audio recording, all of the literal words, leaving behind the pauses, breaths, gasps, hiccups, and other non-verbal sounds in between the words. The program would splice together these in-between segments and make a smooth recording that could be played back. The result was not a blurry mass of indistinguishable murmurs but a kind of "song" that was more revealing than the words had been.

This song is suppressed by our "meaningful" speech, which makes every effort to say "I mean what I mean." But, the song means something else. It is both less and more than the literal words of speech.

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are: conatus, cathesis, isomeric, katagraph, *tesseract*, transience, and anamorphosis. See <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/9/19778/files/2023/03/six-terms.pdf>

# Vico

Giambattista Vico introduced this idea in the 18c., in his account of how the to-be-human animal became the fully human “speaking animal.” This is not to say that animals do not use sign systems. They in fact make much more extensive and productive use of signs than human language, so in a sense, human language is like the destruction of the Tower of Babel: from the perfect language (of Adam and animals) to the imperfect multiple languages that divide subjects with a logic based on distinction rather than 1:1 correspondence. This strategy makes dramatic use of *lalangue*, since the left-overs of human speech are also to be found in nature, as the “poetic” language of animals, plants, the elements (air, earth, fire and water are different *primarily* because of their unique versions of *lalangue*), which arises out of the *passivity* of materials and the *muteness* of animals.

The first humans, Vico argued, were suddenly shocked into understanding this *lalangue* was actually a kind of cryptogram holding back a secret of the material/animal world that, if understood, would give humans access to knowledge of that world, but also knowledge of the future (divination). Thus, the first institutions of culture were derived from the “laws” derived through ceremonial attempts to decipher these “signs” of nature. Of course, all anthropologists have realized the importance of divination, but *only Vico correctly theorized the relation of this “divine speech” of nature* in relation to a theory of metaphor/metonymy, a theory that could be used to explain how all human cultures went through the same developmental stages, and how those stages would be preserved in linguistic and other sign behaviors (e. g. various ways of structuring knowledge) in any given age.

I cannot emphasize this point enough: Vico’s “metaphorical” theory was not fully understood at the time he presented in, in his major works, *The New Science*, *The Study Methods of Our Times*, and *The Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. Worse, his theory of metaphor remains a mystery even by contemporary scholars who study Vico seriously today, because they fail to take into account Vico’s profoundly *visual* logic. It was this visual logic that Vico was provoked to reveal when he inserted an image as a frontispiece to the *New Science*, giving a somewhat implausible account for doing so.

Vico’s association with Rosicrucians of his day was probably what helped him construct the image, but several curious features of the frontispiece keep it from being simply a pictorial emblem, although emblem-logic (the coupling of words and visual signs) was used. Vico cleverly used a lipogram to construct a kind of “mirror stage” for his New Science, and although all the clues are there in plain view to make this discovery, no one has made it. I can show you the “trick,” but it will take a little preparation and reading; anyway you can read all about it in essays I’ve posted on the Internet.

# Lacan

One of the principles of science is independent corroboration. A researcher publishes results, with a detailed account of his/her method; another researcher repeats the steps with the same controls, and the results of this other effort are compared to the first. If they match, there is reason to believe that both experiments have revealed something reliable. The more independent the two projects, the more credible this claim. In the case of Vico's discovery, which was all the more a test because he did not make his "findings" explicit, what happened was all the more extraordinary. Jacques Lacan developed his own theory of metaphor over a period of years, beginning with the first seminars in the late 1950s. He was convinced that metaphor combined a process of condensation (many ideas combining to disguise or suppress a meaning) with an overt construction of a chain of signifiers, metonymically linked to disguise a hidden structure. It was as if Lacan wanted to show the blueprint of Vico's metaphor machinery. The fact that Lacan could *accurately* represent what Vico had revealed only in a concealed, indirect way, was the best kind of corroboration, since Lacan presented his "blueprint" without ever consulting, or even being aware of, Vico's effort. This maximum of independence ruled out any possibility that Lacan was *trying* to duplicate Vico's idea of metaphor.

Who might notice this connection? No Lacanians have indicated even a slight interest in Vico; and no Vichian scholars have indicated any knowledge of Lacan. The improbability that separates Vico and Lacan to produce the "maximum result of corroboration" is repeated in the historical and cultural distances separating the two thinkers. In other words, there is *only* the connection binding the two *almost identical* theories of metaphor; it is this singularity, this improbable coincidence, that qualifies this theory of metaphor as a maximal case of independent discovery — when two people invent something without the knowledge or even awareness of the other. The discovery is deemed to be all the more authentic because of this lack of any cross-influence.

## The Role of *Lalangue*

Both Vico and Lacan emphasized and explained the role of what is *secondary* in communication: what physical elements are necessary but dismissed as irrelevant to the "main message." There is an architectural parallel to the secondary of language, called *poché*, everything in building that is deemed to be supportive of the main functions — physical integrity, functional use, esthetic value (to use the Vitruvian virtues) — but which work "behind the scenes." We group all of these supports into the single term *poché* to mean everything that is invisible, ignored, suppressed, devalued, etc. Slavoj Žižek tried to use the spandrel to characterize this, but of course spandrels are both esthetically significant and sometimes structurally necessary, so this essay failed to describe what Žižek claimed to wish it to describe — architecture's *secondary* (non-)qualities. You can imagine how difficult it is to talk about architecture apart from the Vitruvian virtues or its

perceived qualities. There is no theoretical basis for talking about *lalangue*. My attempts to introduce Vico and Lacan to architecture theory audiences has had zero effect.

How might I make a case for *lalangue*? To require an understanding the works of two thinkers who have been called “impossible” by themselves, but then to further require an understanding of the hitherto unrecognized connection between these two difficult thinkers is a demand that no



A composite of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Antonello's *St. Jerome* provokes the question of how any set of “core terms” might apply to both works, allowing such a speculative merger.

one seems willing or able to undertake. My work-around has been to find a few definable terms that can be understood independently of Vico and Lacan, terms that still relate to an understanding of *lalangue*'s secondary role in culture, the arts, architecture, and thought in general.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the best way to understand these terms is in relation to the works of Vico and Lacan. But, if this possibility is ruled out, the only remaining option is to study the work of artists, architects, film-makers, etc. where these terms not only reveal the “inner workings” of products of genius but reveal things that have been overlooked by other critical perspectives.

I have relied on a set of paintings, films, and buildings to serve as “meta-examples”: Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, several paintings by René Magritte, Antonello da Messina's painting of *St. Jerome in His Study* ... These seem to demonstrate the utility of these “summary terms” by deciding key questions that other critical theories have failed to answer. In some cases, Lacan has used the same examples with the same success, even though he has used

slightly different terms.

This is the thesis that exposes itself to skeptical interrogation: that projects with a certain “meta-” designation, such as *Las Meninas*, aim to decipher the *lalangue* “spoken” in a series of “cryptograms” compressed within material conditions of a building, that may be exposed through a series of strategic *katagraphic* cuts: cuts able to create *duals* preserved through representations of the excavation process that show an *isomeric* relation of opposites (positive-negative, interior-exterior, top-bottom, ...). In some cases the duals are themselves split into second-level duals, as when vertical elements are inverted, high for low and *vice versa*; and reverse-angle views, revealing chirality (handedness). These are not characterizations but, instead, features that are predicted by the major premise (the building as containing an internalized *lalangue*) which *should be present in some form*, as proof of the premise.

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<sup>2</sup> These terms to some extent a *collège* methodology: mixing and matching fragments of different works to illustrate/prove the operative functionality of *lalangue*.

My argument is that *lalangue*, as “the secondary,” is “spoken” in many ways precisely because it *cannot be spoken* in any literal way. It is “the unspoken,” “the unspeakable,” the element that makes art *necessary*. If it were not for *lalangue*, there would be no need for art, no way for art to achieve *meaningfulness* in the face of its resistance and indifference to normative meanings. We cannot ignore, let alone disprove, the experience of meaningfulness in our experience of art, or architecture as art. The issue is, how do we understand it, talk about it, *theorize* it. Doesn’t the resistance of *lalangue/poché* to normative language make theorizing impossible? Isn’t this the question of “aura” that Walter Benjamin described in a historicist way?

I see the question of *lalangue* as a mandate for any and every thesis/theory about art or architecture, whose “mute” qualities are more important than ones we can relate to the Vitruvian virtues of usefulness, solidity, and even beauty. It is the meaningfulness of meaninglessness, the form of the formless. While it may not be necessary to relate these questions to Vico or Lacan — although I would question how any inquiry into meaningfulness could avoid encountering these two major thinkers — it is essential to know how and why, working independently, Vico and Lacan both connected the universal functionality of *lalangue* to a theory of metaphor. It is necessary to involve the question of metaphor, if only because it is strategically useful to know that condensation of metaphor is simultaneous to displacement of metonymical chains, where suppression/condensation represents an artwork’s *con*-struction and displacement involves the very metonymical procedures artists of various stripes develop in order to decipher the *lalangue* of building.

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So easy to paint, so hard to explain ...