

# poetry as reverse-engineering

The technique of chiaroscuro allows the visualization of the death drive. It turns the anthropological phenomenon of “between the two deaths” into a condition that can be experienced and represented in visual arts, narrative, and film. The “experiment” of this carryover is a trial correlation between elements “naïvely” appearing in any two media separated by time or technique. This experiment extends to casual attributes of functions, which may be considered as essential features when effects are taken as causes — that is, when operators themselves are considered as “master signifiers” ( $S_1$ ) whose middle term ( $B > B$ ) is circular or self-referential. This inversion metaphorizes “natural relationships” by inserting an “animism” or false intentionality, as in Ruskin’s so-called pathetic fallacy. An example would be to take the condition, “the sky is blue,” and invert effect for cause: *blueness* is the intended state of the sky, and other states are failures or corruptions of that identity. This has particular impact on the phenomenon of the name, which reverses its role from attribute to cause of personal identity. In the central case of “between the two deaths,” the phenomenon of delay between the actual and symbolic death of the deceased *becomes* the symbolic — that is, the symbolic is, in essence, the “momentum” that carries the subject past the technical moment of death. Vico studies has already identified and explored this reverse-engineering phenomenon in the name of the “reversed antinomasia” that is the basis of Vico’s discovery of mythic mentality, the “imaginative universal” (*universale fantastico*). At the theoretical-discursive level, the “contingent” difficulty of Vico and Lacan becomes the constitutive and causal key, embodied in the phenomenon of Vico’s “discontinuities” and Lacan’s mysterious *mi-dire* manner of speaking and writing.



Francesco Botticini, “Assumption of the Virgin” (detail). National Gallery, London. Richard Bernheimer traces the tradition of the theatrical structure of the heavens to the project of the *Theatrum Mundi* of Giulio Camillo and other theater metaphors, where the mind is given its optical basis in a series of stages of gradual disincarnation, bringing to bear the literal meaning of the sarcophagus, “eater of flesh.” The additional tradition of these mortifying rings relates to the mathematical relationships behind the “music of the spheres” — merging at points with scientific discourse on the structure of the Ptolomaic cosmos, whose center of Hades (“invisible”) was sutured through an impossible short-circuit connection to Purgatory beyond the *primum mobile* separating the “mortal” from the “immortal” spheres.

**Visualization of the death drive.** When the camera or painter “pulls back” to create a frame identified with a “space of production” enclosing a representative scene (“look at this!”), the viewer is delayed. The immediacy we assume with mirrors and photographs — the efficiency with which they deliver the goods with mechanical accuracy — is momentarily interrupted. As in the case of Jefferies’ apartment in *Rear Window*, we have a chance to look at the broken camera, the framed negative, the photographs of previous assignments — the paraphernalia of his trade. His apartment is in front of our view of the urban courtyard; its chiaroscuro establishes a site of production where exposition (conversation about the goings-on of the neighbors, the Thorwalds in particular) will be delivered *via* Jeff, Lisa, Stella, and Doyle the detective-friend. Frontal chiaroscuro makes evident what is normally silenced in the process of framing a representation. The indicative gesture that points the viewer towards the scene of (re-)presentation is, normally, quick and invisible. Frontal chiaroscuro slows this indication, this pointing gesture, down to create a community of viewers — intentional, plotted viewers who conspire with the contingent viewers, the real audience. Who is dead and who is alive? We know from the traditions of audiences that we, the contingent viewers, have volunteered to “play dead” for the duration of the performance. We agree to sit still, to remain silent, to sit in the dark and listen and watch; to judge; to give our thumbs-up or thumbs-down to the souls on trial before us. Thus, as Richard Bernheimer has pointed out, the rings of seats in an auditorium have long served artists as the model for the heavens, and audience members have, unbeknownst, been transformed into the cherubim, seraphim, saints and apostles who greet the newly ascended soul.<sup>1</sup> The mock-death of the audience, its own “between the two deaths” during which the physical entry into the cave of the theater will be terminated by the “symbolic death” which is, inverted, more understandable: the literal “death of the symbol,” the end of the performance, that is.

The mirroring of the audience’s between-the-two-deaths in the representation constructs, in the chiaroscuro space surrounding the “real view,” an equivalent delay, a twin delay, for which the audience becomes a “silent partner” for the “part-silence” — the “partial object” of the voices that bring what the audience should know to bear, in an off-site location that is a space of production.

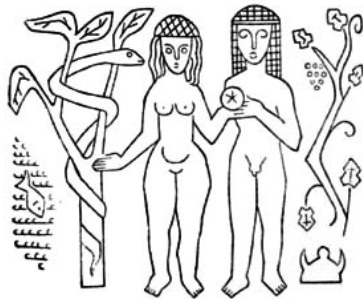
The characters in this space will open and close a curtain. They will direct our attention over here, over there. They will cogitate, ruminate, speculate, wonder; but most significantly they will introduce errors, omissions, misperceptions, and gaps that invite the actual audience in to fill. These “gaps in a gap” short-circuit the intermediary interpretation that re-packages the presentation scene; without a defect in the exposition we would have nothing to do as an audience; they characters who re-present the presentation would simply tell us what to think and how to react. They do this to some extent anyway, and act “on our behalf” — automating the reaction process. Like canned laughter on television, exposition takes up the role of the professional mourner, enlarging it to include a broader range of responses. It laughs, cries, thinks, etc. so that we will not be burdened with having to follow too closely. Thus it’s important to treat this automation as a process with strategically placed imperfections that become, for the audience, signs of authenticity. The narrative is always the defective narrator: the one we “see beyond” and follow “only up to a point.”

**Twist and turn.** Frontal chiaroscuro, the optical counterpart to “between the two deaths” as a journey in the underworld, gives way to its own internal inconsistency, its short circuit that allows the audience to gain access to a region it cannot trespass. This is the function of the second type of chiaroscuro, the “oblique” or “orthogonal” chiaroscuro that moves to the side of the entire process of representation, re-framing it as a left-to-right (or right-to-left) sequence. As in

1. Richard Bernheimer, “Theatrum Mundi,” *The Art Bulletin* 38, 4 (December 1956): 225-247.



Albrecht Dürer, "The Artist and Model in the Studio," *Unterweysung der Messung*, Nuremberg, 1538 (orig. 1525). Image courtesy of the Warnock Library, Octovo, Oakland CA.



Robert Graves, *The Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*. Some of the Sumerian icons related directly to Genesis versions, although elements were reinterpreted. Here, Eve is "really" a sibyl consulting the oracular python, in the Mediterranean tradition of divination.



Antonello da Messina, "St. Jerome in His Study," National Gallery, London.

the case of Albrecht Dürer's "Artist and Model in the Studio," the new observer sees the mechanism of reproduction in profile, "from the side." The lucinda is presented as the side of a frame, a bezel. The mirror is turned so that we see the glass and taine at the same time. In plot terms, this twist is reserved for moments, such as the one in *Vertigo* when Scotty realizes that he's been set up to be a "reliable" (NOT!) witness of Elster's murder of his wife. Here, the "twist" is not just logical; Hitchcock frames it within the painful climb up the tower and the dizziness of vertigo. Having nothing beneath our feet creates a small margin at the top of the metaphorical tower we must reach in order to make the connections. The ancient connection that reverse-engineers this filmic effect is the circularity of the B>B as a "moment" of discovery, the anagnorisis described by Aristotle as the sped-up fast-track skipping past all temporal boundaries.

In *The Odyssey*, the hero's nurse realizes it is her old master and not just another suitor visiting to gain the hand of Penelope when she bathes him and touches the scar on his leg — a scar she had known from his youth. In the final scene of Chaplin's *City Lights*, the woman the tramp had restored to sight does not recognize him visually but only when she puts some coins into his hand. The touch, in both cases, short-circuits the rationalized optics of spatial separation and collapses the dimensions used to project that separation. The touch, like the acousmatic call, is a part-object fast-track over the object(ive), resistance of space and sequential action.

The sideways reading of the whole scene is itself a case of reverse-engineering. We can see the beginning of the sentence and its end simultaneously. The line is not a "picture of time" but, rather, time is experienced as a point that changes as time passes. When we realize that this point is really a line we see from the end, as a point, we rotate it so that the entire extent of this "sagittal" dimension is displayed, origin and end as left and right. The  $\emptyset/\beta$  phenomenon plays a curious role in this left-to-right process. Robert Graves developed an apocryphal thesis that, in cribbing creation myths for the writing of Genesis, Hebrew scribes using Sumarian tablets read the order of images consistently right-to-left, the convention for Hebrew script. The story was told originally, however, in the "boustrophodon" order (*boustros* = in the manner of an ox plowing a field, i.e. left-to-right, then right-to-left, etc.). Every other line was, therefore, read backwards and the connections between the ends of lines to the beginnings of the next were all in error. Rather than creating a useless creation myth, however, Graves contended that this "defective narration" made way for the appearance of the Real-sacred that gave Genesis its real poetic and theological value. Stories invented to "cover the defects" of translation were "uncanny" in their double purpose: (1) the actual invention of a fake narrative to make sense of the out-of-sequence Sumarian story; and (2) the introduction of a Möbius-band-style audience-interaction with the "partial object" of the narrative, an internal contradiction, or genuine  $\sqrt{-1}$ . The relation of this impossible-Real to other traditions in the Pentateuch having to do with names (Adam's use of names; the unpronounceable name of God, etc.) situates the theological issues within the Lacanian Real. This thesis is, coincidentally, that presented in Antonello da Messina's painting of St. Jerome, where the notion of translation as impregnation based on a misreading is put into visual form — a definitive use of both frontal and oblique chiaroscuro.