

Lacan, Architecture, and the Idiotic Conditions of End-Times

Donald Kunze

Penn State University

The following points construct a continuous narrative, but each paragraph is numbered and counted as a "stand-alone topic" that, like the chapters of Julio Cortázar's novel Hopscotch, can be selectively re-ordered in a presentation that randomly selects topics to fit time requirements. This method follows the rule developed below in the idea of "sorites," the perception of a collective identity that emerges from a process of conjunction and negation, cancellation and preservation (Aufhebung), leaving an "odd man out." This is a Lullian process aimed to constitute a "thinking machine" in the spirit of the ancient zairja (زايرجة), a mechanical computing device employed to defamiliarize and thus postpone any process of synthesis.

- §1. Architecture theory has typically found itself to be in the midst of a crisis, generated by history, technology, politic, or theory itself. The hallmark of these disasters is the inevitable presence of the binary signifier, set to draw lines of battle and establish rules of engagement.¹ The logic of the prophecies constructed by crisis thinking is predictably self-fulfilling. Thanks to the binary signifier, the metaphor of the perfect circle inevitably accompanies the binary's hopeful yin-yang design, complete except for a final segment that is blocked by various "problematics": conversion of hand drawing to digital formats, ignorance of sustainable design practices, "instrumental" practices that rely on a Cartesian means-to-ends causality, etc.
- §2. Almost all deployments of the binary signifier in academic architecture are done without awareness of the Lacanian critique of the binary signifier: i.e. that it is the Symbolic *per se* that imbeds the various impasses that bar the utopian solution. Those who criticize Lacan himself for his own masculine/feminine binary in his *mathemes* of sexuation miss the point. Rather than the "all and some" of Aristotle, Lacan uses a logic of part and whole.² This relieves Lacan of Boolean obligations to exclude the middle, while necessitating recognition of conditions corresponding to the "not-all," double negations, and inside frames. Lacan does not complete the utopian circle, rather he champions the gapped circle, the return of desire to itself, a point of awareness that is "held in negative suspension" by the *objet petit a*. Following Hegel, there is no binary in Lacan's dialectics, which like the Borromeo knot holds the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in a confederation of *jouissance*. In its place are the key ideas of extimity — the "reality-out-there" of the unconscious — and the occultation (sublation) of the key term of any would-be binary, such as ~~woman~~ or the non-existent Big

¹ In the finished paper, I will offer evidence from Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Crisis of Modern Architecture*, Juhanni Pääsasma's works, and others who decry the instrumentality of Enlightenment reason.

² Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 1995.

Other placed opposite the subject's desire.

- §3. Himself a champion of extimacy and occultation, Slavoj Žižek has suggested many of the possible "fixes" for academic overinvestment in the binary signifier. In a short essay on the architectural spandrel, Žižek found, quite appropriately, a space between Vitruvian values of *firmitas* and *utilitas* — a *venustas* between the arch and architrave (generally, any space "left over" as a result of overlapping architectural functions) for "exaptation" — a reserve storage for the unexpected to be reclaimed in a moment of future anteriority. In another essay, Žižek restored an idea he had earlier trashed, the double frame, saying he had invented the idea on the spot while attending a boring conference. Not only was Žižek not the first inventor of the (bogus) double frame, but he failed at first to recognize it as a key component in his own theory of parallax, offered up on several occasions through the anecdote about Claude Lévi-Strauss's story of villagers who drew two completely different sketches of the same village. In his elaborations of Hegelian dialectic and anamorphosis in various guises, Žižek can only be praised for giving the double frame a real presence sufficient to the needs of architecture theory. Mladen Dolar has, in his account of interpellation, shown how the inside frame is also this double, providing a left-over space belonging uniquely to psychoanalysis.
- §4. Dolar and Žižek have, in addition, provided effective means of combatting the rampant uncritical reliance on binary signifiers, most of them anecdotal. Dolar's great collection is *A Voice and Nothing More*, where the phonetic basis of linguistics is replaced by the idea of the acousmatic voice, the stochastic structure of the space between the two frames. My favorite Žižek story is about deserters in World War I who found refuge in the bomb craters and abandoned trenches of no-man's land. Speaking diverse languages and wearing the tattered uniforms of multiple warring armies, they nonetheless developed a truly utopian community with its own social services, communications systems, and supply lines. This is "tarrying with the negative" written in capital letters — a refutation of the binary signifier's linear logic by means of an impossible-Real extimacy.
- §5. Is it possible to aim such refutations of the binary signifier directly at what I claim to be the source of architecture's critical maladies — Roman Jakobson's simplification of medical data derived from the treatment of aphasia victims of World War I, whose brain damage seemed to suggest two primary and independent mental functions, semblance and contiguity? In Jacobsen's interpretation, semblance's obviously "metaphoric" logic left contiguity to metonymy, and through this association metonymy was simplified into a logical processor of part-to-whole relationships. In terms of causality, this meant that while metaphor was capable of envisioning time reversal, metonymy would be committed, out of its dedication to logic, to the arrow of time that Zeno had stopped in its tracks. There could only be a "palintropic" construction of causal chains — and thus a direct limitation to the signifying

chain in its most ideological operations — for metonymy to do its duty as a binary signifier opposite metaphor's poetic resources.

- §6. The damage done by this simplistic left-brain/right-brain construct was, at the retail level especially, extensive. Simplification of a poetic-humanistic metaphoric consciousness battling a reductive, instrumental logical mindset not only created a hostility to the theoretical sophistication that might have identified the limitations of binary signification, it set up academic programs, curricula, and even patterns of faculty hires to insure that metonymy would be taking the heat for failed civilization for decades to come.
- §7. What is architecture's stake in this? In a series of recent essays I have claimed that metonymy is the key to the important question of the origins and development of human thought as well as to the "inner logic" of ethnographical evidence scholarship might use to provide some unified estimate of subjectivity to guide its studies. Architecture does not, as many assume, interest itself solely in conditions of "the built environment." As a field of study it concerns itself with the materiality of human desire in many of its forms, as a means of constituting spaces and times, not just finding places within them. "Parallax," "networks of Symbolic relations," "master signifiers" and other terms key to Lacanian studies and, in particular, the development of Lacan's ideas in the works of Žižek, Zupančič, Dolar, Fink, and others are — as a few key theorists have claimed — central to architecture's theoretical concerns. The human scene in its collective and individual aspects, its a-temporal and historical contingencies, its status as idea and procedural materialities, its formal presentations and unpredictable adaptations are not just about buildings and their performance.
- §8. If there is any missing component in contemporary Lacanian studies, it is any reference to the 18c. Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico.³ By an accident of my own peculiar education, combining studies in architecture, geography, and philosophy, the connections between Lacan and Vico seem obvious. Lacan himself seemed on the verge of making this connection as he delved further into James Joyce near the end of his life. But, for Lacanians in general, Vico is a distant planet. My proof of this concept lies in the correctives both Vico and Lacan, and later Žižek (who seems completely to have missed the Vico connection) make for the binary signifier. All three thinkers seem to realize the importance of binary signifiers for ideology. In short, master signifiers are born out of the mediations set up as forced choices by the Big Other, who constitutes the mediator of conflicts. Žižek points out the fallacy of multiculturalism — which always offers itself as a cure or palliative for binary signification — in the construction of the hypothetically neutral point of view that offers us the new array of choices. As Pope Francis might ask, "who are we to judge?" — i.e. from *what*

³ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, 1744.

point is it possible to re-present cultural diversity as an “array of choices” freely offered and freely taken? Just *Who* is setting the terms of this deal?

- §9. The Who, like the Who in the famous Abbot and Costello comedy routine “Who’s on First?” is occulted within the operations of university discourse. The array of choices we are to Enjoy! is the *Che vuoi?* of an Other who remains behind the scenes — or, to be more specific, behind the same curtain required for all Big Others to produce their scare tactics. Critiques of this curtain range from the story of Zeuxis and Parhassius to *The Wizard of Oz*. The Who falls into its two component parts: interrogative pronoun and Name of the Father — combined in the figure of Don Giovanni’s *Commandatore*, the stone guest, and the *père* of *père-version*, specifically the father who must be “turned” as Joyce turned his love-hatable alcoholic parent into the Here Comes Everybody of Vico. In Mozart’s banquet scene or the geography of the city by the river that dominates *Finnegans Wake*, the binary (Shem and Shaun) is treated by ethnography and the modern novel alike as *apophrades*, the voice of the dead called to prophesy. Twins, on this count, figure in nearly every city foundation rite, if only because their appearance together is limited to specific times and places, and the limit *per se* is the key to the architecture of the city.
- §10. The limit is what the binary signifier cannot handle. Either it attempts to establish an ideal balance point when both polar terms undergo occultation (truth/fiction) or the repressed term returns to haunt the signifying chain, as in the case of Rome. Freud had alluded to this kind of haunting in his treatment of *Moses and Monotheism*, Lacan in his positioning of truth as a “first” and “fourth” term in his *mathemes* for discourse. If “the letter always arrives at its destination,” it arrives bearing the reversed messages of the Signifiers who, at this moment of truth, must be read *retroactively* as the *pharmakeius*, the Real hair of the dog that bit us Symbolically. Poison or life-giving elixir, it is the chirality factor — the function of twins — that allows us to “hug the boundary” (Pavel Florensky) in crossing from the unconscious to consciousness.
- §11. Whether we use the example of this truth in the first and fourth place through Lacan’s treatment of Poe’s short story, “The Purloined Letter,” or through Žižek’s case of Marcel Pagnol’s *Jean de Florette*, “what goes around comes around,” which is to say that the imagined perfect circle is completed by what made it a circle in the first place, the occultation of some element of *jouissance* that, suppressed, insures a perfect automation of its truth. Aristotle’s *automaton* and *tuchē* are now understood as the uncanny of Borges’ “Garden of the Forking Paths.” Ideology is all the more insured when we are made to feel free to act, to have unlimited freedom of choice. “Forced choice” is best when served buffet style — a lesson from *Moira* who, in the croaking voices of countless sibyls, begs us to do what we want, it will be our just deserts that come calling in the end.

- §12. Architecture is not explained by Lacanian theory, nor is it corrected; but, when Lacan shows up at architecture's various hearth-fires, the *fête* finds its parts and orders them accordingly. This is the Rabelaisian element common to both architecture and the Lacanian subject, to Vico's and Joyce's subjects as well — a *Festarchitektur* of buildings and cities that are built to be burned, or at least crisped by torchlight or rolled by fireworks. *In extremis* the binary becomes the line to be hugged in a delayed crossing.⁴ The no-man's land after all is death's second game, and we know Who's on first. In lieu of positive theory, my project has been to develop a critique based on Žižek's idea of "end-times" — getting things right, right before the collapse of global ecologies and economies, taken as two sides of the same "house" *in extremis*. This confronts the fake crisis constructed out of the binary signifier as a version of Hegel's "beautiful soul," the academic commentator who offers hope after dirtying the options. The binary is a way of "keeping one's hands clean." My alternative is to dirty the hands by means of the "option of the idiot," drawn from Mary Chase's play, later a movie. The story about an idiot, Elwood, who imagines a large rabbit to be his companion and protector, is really about the refusal to recognize the official dividing line separating codes from messages. When a waiter asks a newly arrived patron how she is, the answer should not be a litany of recent experiences, medical problems, or a psychological profile. Everyone who is not an idiot realizes that the correct response is "fine, thanks; could I see the wine menu." Elwood takes everyone "at face value" by continuing to honor the fake protocols of politeness as if they were sincere. It's not that Elwood doesn't realize the folly of his behavior, it's that he has inverted it. By keeping to his "fiction" of an imaginary rabbit friend, he has not only made the rabbit visible to himself, he has created a sharable True that has all the powers of the legendary *púca*, known in many cultures as a spiritual guide, a usually helpful but potentially aggressive companion.⁵
- §13. I use idiot in an expanded, philosophical sense. Every scholar has limits, of age, culture, language, education, etc. I did not attend Yale, nor did I learn French or travel to Paris in time to catch Lacan's last lectures. I have not benefitted from the riches of Louvain or the European Graduate School. I missed meeting Mladen Dolar when both of us were in Maastricht at the same time by coincidence. I do not have a proper background in psychoanalysis or even philosophy outside of the study of Ernst Cassirer and Giambattista Vico. Compared to most authors I read and admire, I am an idiot. Now, I must learn what is involved to be a good idiot rather than a bad one.
- §14. With Elwood as my guide, I take it that the creation of magical beings depends on a proper active application of imagination, what Vico meant when he distinguished *imaginare* from the

⁴ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (1922).

⁵ In Tibet, it is said that prolonged meditation (over 200 hours recommended) can produce a desired animal companion, visible only to the meditator.

noun *fantasia*, a very Lacanian thing to do. In Vico's case, *imaginary* required one not to fall for Parhassios's trick, to want to see behind every curtain a hidden content, but rather to understand the role of the curtain in the first place. In ideology, there are many curtains, in fact one could say "it's all curtains." This is easy enough to understand if one takes seriously the *matheme* for the discourse of the university, in conjunction with the *matheme* for the Master, since mastery is what universities falsely promise to those who will be enlisted only as Servants though called "colleagues."

- §15. The idiot does not need to pretend not to know things, only to refuse to sign for those things offered uniquely *via* the delivery service of the Symbolic. This means that, instead of translating *scientia* as "knowledge," one follows the Vichian example of *kenosis*, not a New Age mystical lore but knowledge-as-act, in the sense that acts *precede* thought. Reversing causality reversed the arrow of time as well, and kenotic thinking uses "palintonic" time, a "sliding now" in contrast to the time-line of "palintropos," bringing Heraklitus closer to Zeno and Parmenides, and certainly very close to Plato's *Timaeus*.
- §16. Palintonos is the time proper to the "retroactive realization that knowledge has already been pre-formed," that the model of thinking as exploration of an external unknown ignores the occultation of subjectivity that has already taken place. Žižek uses an example taken, appropriately, from symbolic logic but he does not for some reason name it. This is the logic of the one grain of sand that makes a "pile," the one hair subtracted that makes a bald man bald: sorites. Lewis Carroll, in his own original symbolic logic, used sorites extensively to show how statements written in the "standard form" of palintropic conversion of causes to effects contain hidden within their series a pair of terms that palintropically convert the entire series into a "collectivity of exaptation" ... a series subverting terms, "radically suppressed," which will "return" when matching states ($A/\sim A$ pairs) are united and cancelled out. Žižek seems to be unaware of the Lewis Carroll connection, or at least does not realize that Carroll precisely anticipates Lacan's own quadrated *matheme* of sexuation. Both "logical squares" (unlike Aristotle's) use negation in two distinctively different ways: one to indicate wholes, another to indicate exceptions. This doubled functionality is also characteristic of the non-numerical calculus of George Spencer-Brown, who took Carroll's sorites to be a paradigm exemplar of non-Boolean logic: a way of thinking without the excluded middle — a way of detoxifying the binary signifier!
- §17. The connection here is that Carroll invented idiocy, Spencer-Brown played the idiot, and I am an idiot. As in the famous Grouch Marx quote (paraphrasing): "Your Honor, my client looks like an idiot and talks like an idiot, but don't be deceived — he *is* an idiot!" Emphasis here is on the logic by which truth is understood to be, as ideology, a fiction. As an understanding of the role of negation (the wisdom of Elwood's Harvey), this process is "less than nothing and

more than everything" — <>, Lacan's *poignon* for fantasy, extimated as ><, the reverse of the fantasy, the invisible and very tall rabbit, ><.

- §18. End Times generally seems to allude to disaster motifs in contemporary films, but I see it in terms of the *act* of kenotic learning. Highly individuated ("idiot" originally means "a private person"), this is learning shorn of its professional/ financial advantages, i.e. tenure, positions on corporate boards, think tanks, etc. For those in academia, it is more of an anti-tenure device guaranteed to induce oblivion. Possibly the goal is to convert "unpublished" to "unpublishable" by means of prodigious output: *glossolalia* in the spirit of Lacan's own version of *mi-dire*. Vico mastered this 200 years before Lacan, writing in an Italian that most Italians find impenetrable. His major work, *The New Science*, was revised twice. The genius of the last edition published the year of his death, 1744, was credited entirely to an act that Vico claims to have taken place: the unexpected withdrawal of a text that left the book with a signature to fill. Vico hastily assembled engravers to work up an image that summarized the whole work using the metaphor of the "Table of Cebes," a *mons delectus* or Mount Purgatory (filtration plant) to test readers before the challenges of the main text. The entire image is a sorites logic: every item has its inverse content, every item *functions as an inversion device*. The key to the image is the match between two un-inverted images: the helmet of Hermes and the divine eye.



Frontispiece, known as the *dipintura*,
The New Science, 1744 edition.

- §19. Just as Vico claimed that the first humans began their human mentality in clearings made to view and measure the divinatory signs of the sky, Vico himself makes a clearing in the forest

of words, fills it with an *objet petit a*, the “odd couple” of Jove and Hermes, which explains his master trope, the *universale fantastico*, “imaginative universal,” the fantasy to cover and distance the Real of Jove’s thunder. This is the inside frame of *The New Science* and the test for any idiotic reading of the book. It is Joycean to the core, but also Lacanian in its efforts to keep open the gap necessary to restore metonymy/metalepsis as the key to the metaphoric mentality of the first humans.

§20. Mladen Dolar argues for a logical sequence inside the historical-contingent sequence of Lacan’s theoretical development. First, questions about the Symbolic order arrive with the Mirror Stage and conclude with a picture of how ideology works. Using Althusser’s idea of interpellation as the inscription of an ambiguous “external” call (the policeman’s “Hey you!”) at a central position within the subject/subjectivity, ideology works using the principle of extimacy. The external world is valued subjectivity and mirrors the enigmatic desires of the internalized Other, operating through an “inside frame.” But, Dolar explains, ideology does not captivate the subject completely. There is a remainder, and this remainder, embodied in the symptoms, belongs to psychoanalysis. Yet, psychoanalysis too has its limit and remainder: the impasse of transference, where the analysand’s love for the analyst constitutes a “last line defense” of the unconscious, threatened by the exposure of analysis. The answer to this impasse lies in the nature of a second form of *jouissance*, a “*jouissance₂*” needed to repair the Borromeo rings at the point where Symbolic and Real should overlap. This repair is concentric with the Imaginary, and here I make an “idiotic” move to connect *jouissance₂* to the affairs of art, particularly as exemplified by Joyce’s *père-version* carried out in *Finnegans Wake*. In fact, Joyce’s famous *vesica piscis* diagram seems to be performing precisely this repair, with the sexuation motif of twins Shem and Shaun competing for the love of their sister, Issy: the city by the river theme.

§21. *Jouissance₂* is just what the doctor ordered to repair the Real/Symbolic, the true nature of the binary signifier’s occultation of an initial term (“impossible-Real”) that continues to haunt the symbolic chain “at a distance” (Ed Pluth, *Signifiers and Acts*, 2007). It is the construction of this distance that is important for architecture, because it is not an abstract expression but a matter of the reception of architecture “within” a space-time uniquely dimensioned by desire. Special “sites of exception” in art, literature, and architecture demonstrate that artists have anticipated Lacan’s important “last thesis” with blue-prints for converting representation to action, a blue-print specifically condensed in Vico’s *dipintura* in *The New Science*.