The Hysteric's Dreamworld: Uncanny Crossings in *The Dead of Night*

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Film’s most impressive contribution to the psychoanalysis of the dream, which establishes it as a critical key to fantasy, is the construct of the “death dream” — the imaginary projection of a life past the instance of literal death. From Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* to Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, this narrative mode affords a fully uncanny alternation between a conscious and unconscious ordering. The “meta-film” of this genre is perhaps *Dead of Night*, a 1945 British anthology combining five Gingrich tales saturated with folkloric magic. Each guest at a house party contributes a story of supernatural encounter in response to a visiting architect’s astonished realization that he has “met everyone before.” With amazing clarity, *Dead of Night* reveals the structure of this particular form of uncanny. It is none other than Lacan’s matheme for Hysteria, where $S \rightarrow S_1$ is (I claim) a mirror image of a suppressed content represented in reverse, $S_2 \rightarrow a$. Although the Master’s and University discourses have been generalized to characterize key historical stages, the Hysteric’s discourse has only rarely been taken out of its original clinical context. What would this require, and what would be the consequences? This presentation argues that Hysteria has long been the implicit structural template for the relation of the dream/nightmare to everyday experience via the theme of the uncanny. The key is to retrieve, from the footnotes of Freud’s famous essay on the uncanny, Ernst Jentsch’s theme of cross-inscription. *Dead of Night* becomes a handbook of how this can be done.

There are two related forms of the living person’s relation to death, the actual dream about life after death, the “dream of death” we’ll call it, and the “death dream,” the literary/cinematic device by which the audience is invited to speculate that a character has died and their point of view, which takes place after their literal death, seems like normal life. The dream of death makes its first splash in the sciences of the mind with the celebrity of a soldier named Er who, after spending twelve days beneath corpses piled up after a battle, came back to life to tell what he had experienced in the soul-processing precincts of Elysium. His report became the basis of Plato’s theory of anamnesis — that when we are experiencing truth we are in fact remembering. The famous historical appearances of the death dream comes on the heels of, in late Roman literature, with the next most famous dream of death. Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, the story of a nobleman who, experimenting with magic, accidentally transforms himself into a donkey and must wait a year for the antidote, a rose, to bloom again so that he can eat its blossoms and be reborn. Macrobius’s commentary on Cicero’s story of the *Dream of Scipio*, put forward in his own book on republics. In both the case of Er and Scipio, the dreamer is dreaming of something then waking up to tell about it — no confusion between what is life and what is dream. In the case of

The confusion option has to be a literary device, that is, something to make the audience think it’s watching a living person act in a lively way only to realize that the living person has actually died and is recalling or constructing a live experience out of a kind of momentum — that life has “slid past” the point of literal death and “forgotten that it is dead.” This literary conceit connects to a broad ethnographic tradition of regarding death as happening in two stages, first a literal death of the body, followed by a period where the soul wanders in quest of a second death, a final placement in the geography of the...
underworld. This interval set the formal period of mourning and was “calibrated” by the imagined or real desiccation of the corpse to the point of skeletal remains. But, as a literary form, the soul's visit to the underworld to achieve a goal of rest, vindication, or wisdom was consolidated as the katabasis, the descent them. The Golden Ass offers a death dream that's a living narrative mainly, but with geometries and devices that ally it to the dream of death.

Dreams and death are commonly associated by all shamanistic cultures. When we dream we not only mimic death, we visit its domains. What we learn there can have no value or great value — the tradition of the “gate of horn” through which true dreams pass versus the “gate of ivory,” the exit taken by false dreams. Shamanism teaches that dreams can be practiced and perfected to gain a kind of super-knowledge of the world, what we might call by its theological name, kenosis, an emptying of the conscious will to make room for a total re-fill of the divine. Because Harold Bloom has used kenosis in a modern literary context in relation to five other terms, I would like to continue talking about it as a way of “knowing without knowing,” i.e. the knowledge of things without consciousness that we know them, a template for how the unconscious, specifically, constitutes a kind of knowledge. Kenosis plays a particularly important role in the death dream and its relation to hysteria, and Bloom's terms help articulate that relationship.

In literature, the death dream follows the ethnographic/shamanistic itinerary for the journey of the soul. It is a retreat (askesis) in relation to pursuit of or by a daemon (a space-time defying agency) with only the aid of signs that are missing half of their message (tesserae, doors without keys, keys without doors, messages broken half, etc.). Passage depends on discovering the missing half, which is concealed not in a specific place but, rather, dispersed generally, scattered as fragments in a field of debris where the only clue to discovery is pattern and turbulence (clinamen). The manifestation of this turbulence is an “acousmatic” voice that is simultaneously an embodiment and disembodied, here and elsewhere, near and remote — i.e. the voice destabilizes the function of time and space dimensions. And, because in dreams one is unable to distinguish the living from the dead, the acousmatic voice is the link to the wisdom (kenosis) entrusted to the dead, who may return it in the form of omens, prophecy, judgment — i.e. the True with a capital ‘T’ (apophrades).

1 The role of the visit to the liminal space of the underworld in the experience of death or its simulations in ritual is covered by W. F. Jackson-Knight, Cumean Gates; A Reference of the Sixth Aeneid to the Initiation Pattern (London: Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1936).

2 Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom's six terms are: kenosis, daemon, apophrades (voice/presence of the dead), askesis (flight/retreat), clinamen (turbulence/surve), and tesserae (the split token). Bloom did not seem to be aware that the terms have any formal or psychological relationships and simply listed them as successive components affecting the new poet in relation to over-present masters. What if, however, these terms related to anxiety in the psychoanalytical-Lacanian sense, i.e. to over-presence in general and the hysterical reaction to it? In my pragmatic use of these terms I will hold out for this option, just in case it brings Lacan's theories of anxiety closer to the function of the death drive.
Because the acousmatic voice disrupts the standard x-y-z of Euclidian space, it is also the governor of the topological conditions of the underworld, and the key to why Hades, ᾠδης, also means “the invisible.” Hearing the acousmatic voice is a “call from nowhere” that is an important component of the death dream in modern film and literature. Without knowing or having to believe in the full shamanistic repertoire of forces involved with visiting the realm of death, we can enjoy the death dream thanks to the acousmatic voice and its ability to defy logical causality, temporal lines, and spatial distinctions. The normal rules dividing subjects and objects are violated by the acousmatic voice, as we will see in our central example, the ventriloquist’s tale from the 1945 British thriller, The Dead of Night.

The Lacan Connection

As the psychoanalyst and translator Bruce Fink has emphasized, the death drive was Freud’s most complicated idea. It drove away most of his followers, who preferred to emphasize the importance of strengthening the role of the ego in its battle with irrational impulse. However, the death drive, a counterweight to the idea that the subject sought positive pleasure, was key. Why does the subject — as a subject, take up an aggressive and destructive position against itself? Why does this impulse appear primarily as a structure (of repetition, compulsion)? And, why does the death drive work especially well at the level of the collective, i.e. of the civilization that subjects create for themselves that contrast so radically and so negatively with the “auto-erotic” paradise of childhood and, ethnographically, early cultures?

If most of Freud’s followers rejected his theory of the death drive, Jacques Lacan identified it as the sine qua non element that was not just the purest part of Freud but the key to all of his other theories. La cause Freudienne was synonymous with a return to the project of explaining the death drive as the signature function of subjectivity, which for both Freud and Lacan was a gradual process by which the Symbolic (networks of social and psychical relationships maintained through language and culture) established a formal ordering of the Imaginary. Here, I’m using Lacan’s three fundamental terms, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real to suggest that the Real remains the “traumatic” key to the subject’s continuing intensive relation to the death drive, even as against the “reality” the Symbolic strives to maintain. The Real, in relation to the True of the dreamer’s experience with the “kenotic” realm of death, where the “voice of the dead” violates rules that separate all here’s and now’s, define life and death relations, and set up spatial and temporal orders, is the bête noire of the Symbolic, i.e. not just a resistance to symbolization but a dæmon of a “topological” type, which Lacan tried to figure in his references to Möbius bands, Klein bottles, and his most famous space-flip idea, extimité (extimité).

The demon of the Real is that, for Lacan, the unconscious is not “internal” to thoughts but “estimated” as a function of the world “out there.” The pop-culture shorthand for this would be the object that speaks for itself, the ordinary machine, like a lawnmower or car, that becomes a super-computer or, as in the case of Hal in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film, 2001: A Space Odyssey, a computer that becomes a super-subject. Dystopias are filled with such Lacanian intimacies, and popular culture seems to have got the idea right from the start: that “the Truth is out there,” Agent Mulder’s famous claim in The X-Files. The way around the homunculus problem of the unconsciousness, films and fads seem to want to tell us, is the structure known as “cross-inscription”: opposites (binaries) are related not by any mediation point somewhere set in between as a balance point but, rather, by a simultaneous entry of each into the innermost central interior of the other, where each works as an “inside frame” where, although we have the...
experience of looking in from the outside, we are really inside looking out. The surface of the small object divides the viewer from the universe, which is paradoxically contained inside.

The scale reversal of small for large of cross-inscription is perhaps easier to understand in the form of the death dream, where the comparatively short temporal duration of the dream suggests that dreams are contained by life rather than the opposite thesis, that life is contained by dreams, or “The Dream.” This has been no small point in the history of philosophy; even Descartes considered dreams to be the unsettling either-or of his own theory. And, of course, we have the New Age revivalist apothegm about the philosopher Zhuang Zhou who awoke after dreaming he was a butterfly wondering if he were not really a butterfly now dreaming he was a man.

Cross Inscription and Alignment

Cross-inscription is defined in relation to the uncanny by Freud’s main source on the subject, Ernst Jentsch: that all varieties of experiences labelled as uncanny could be boiled down to two primary conditions: the feeling by someone living that they are being pursued by death, mirrored by the deceased subject who has somehow forgotten that he/she had died — the latter condition of course is the basis of our subject, the death dream. And, because cross-inscription seems to defy the “linear” model of binary relationships that make us think of opposition in spatial terms that allow only a temporal or “palintropic” alternation between the antagonistic states, cross-inscription seems to allow through topological conditions a kind of palintonic simultaneity of antagonistic interaction that takes life and death simply as two alternative viewpoints we might take of the same fundamental condition. This means that the living subject who is apprehensive and anxious about — ultimately all anxiety boils down to this — death cannot be distinguished from the universal condition of the interval known as “between the two deaths,” where the soul of the deceased lives past the moment of literal death to face trials and puzzles that must be resolved in the course of wandering a path that seems, paradoxically, to connect the innermost of the universe to the outermost.

From ancient cosmography to modern psychoanalytical theory, the palintonic condition has been graphically expressed through spaces/surfaces that twist and flip. Lacan’s “interior 8” (left) seems to catch the idea of the precession of planets imagined as the path of a scarab beetle who, in order to account for

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Kunze: The Hysteric’s Dreamworld URL: art3idea.psu.edu/deathdream/
apparent regressive or backward movement of planets, “bent” the flat representational space of the planets’ concentric circuits into a Möbius-band like circuit.\(^4\)

I emphasize the phrase, “cannot be distinguished from.” This is the basic definition of identity, which we represent by the equality sign in mathematics, \(J = J\). We can carry the idea of identity further with the notion that two things cannot be distinguished. When a subject cannot be distinguished from itself, we mean that there must be another “self,” or more accurately another point of view “on” the self that, while it is taken at a different angle and from a different basis, is an angle on the same thing. The two different points of view, let’s call them POV1 and POV2, make us think we are looking at something different, but when these POVs are properly aligned, we see that their two different views are on to the same thing. The alignment is significant. It brings us to an important Hegelian point about the dialectic. Hegel never used the term or even idea of synthesis. This was added by a commentator some twenty years after Hegel had died. Rather, Hegel argued that the second moment of the dialectic, “anthesis,” provided everything. Slavoj Žižek has explained this in terms of the German joke form known Witz, a form made famous by the “Jewish joke.”

Greenberg is dying and his wife, distressed, wants to know his final wishes. “Marry Friedman,” he says. “But, Friedman is your worst enemy,” she protests. “That’s right,” the husband replies.

In other words, truth in the antithesis in Hegelian dialectic is like the punch line of the joke. It doesn’t provide any resolution of opposites; rather it shifts the point of view — it aligns it — so that we see how the problem has the solution already in it, and we realize this retroactively. Those who miss Hegel’s point also don’t get the joke, but the joke is “gettable” nonetheless. So, in terms of the uncanny, life and death are nothing more than two perspectives on to the same True, the same Real. Alignment of these two POVs is a matter both of religion and art, for to see life as death and death in life, religion’s stake in the matter is revelation (“to take away a veil”) while art’s stake is re–volution, a “turning again” of material into itself, a use of self-reference, mirroring, symmetry, and what I will later refer to as “dynamic sequencing” that is explained by an obscure sub-species of symbolic logic, the “sorites.” Art and religion of course are always trading tricks, as we know from the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cult ritual that lasted in one form or another for over 1500 years. Evidence of this kind allows for the mixing-and-matching of techniques, motifs, and stage illusions that perfect the alignment of POVs that recreate the estrangement and reunion of the subject-as-subject, i.e. a life identity “resurrected” from a death identity through experience of an

“inability to distinguish,” a J≠J condition that arises from J≠J, misidentification, disguise, disappearance, eclipse.

The psychoanalytic term for J≠J is aphanisis, which is only in a limited sense the loss of sexual desire. For Lacan, this is more generally the “fading” of the subject in the face of the signifier, the obligation to join the networks of Symbolic affiliation at the cost of being misrecognized. Because this fading is staged in several famous ways in Lacanian theory, we should mention the first and most famous, the Mirror Stage, which begins in the register of the Imaginary but is primarily a transaction that constructs, out of the human individual, a subject proper. The subject, for Lacan, is a subject in relation to the Symbolic, which “overtakes” the autoerotic human through a series of steps mediated by the oral, anal, and phallic drives as “episodes” that condition the child to know what the Symbolic is all about. It is essential to note that Lacan added two drives to Freud’s three, the optic (“gaze”) and acousmatic (“voice”). This supplementary pair is key to understanding how Lacan regards the death drive as the mechanism underlying all of the drives in their function of relating desire (the propelling force) to demand (the way this force is symbolized to others). The gaze and the voice operate within the Symbolic, after the human infant has become a young subject. But, they are the uncanny of the Symbolic, markers of the way the Symbolic is what it is primarily through its breakdowns and malfunctions. Where the Symbolic creates an “ideological” stance towards the membership of its subjects, the gaze and voice continually resist and disrupt this stance. In other words, they depend on a medium they work hard to deconstruct.

The gaze and voice are not, as many readers — not just feminists — have wished them to be, the media of ideology; rather, they are the tokens of ideology’s failure to accomplish its tasks. Think for example of the curtain in Fritz Lang’s The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933), the Wizard behind the curtain in The Wizard of Oz (1939), or even the three window shades raised at the beginning of Rear Window (1954), to be closed in reverse order at the end of the film. The curtain asks the same question it has since the contest of Zeuxis and Parrhasius: do I belong to the world of the viewer or the viewed? Is the voice that you hear thanks to my opening (Rear Window) or not opening (The Wizard of Oz) granted its authenticity by the artwork’s demand for a conditional “suspension of disbelief”; or does my negative function (occlusion, eclipsing, silencing) reside within the power of death to compel us to return to its “fundament,” an origin point, where the voice fails to speak and the gaze fails to return our look?

Opacity, acoustic or optic, works to transcend the scene in which it functions as a negative. For example, in the European middle ages, the institution of carnival served as an “obscene mediator” to allow the Symbolic’s binary, master/servant, to work. This really goes to the heart of how uncanny cross-inscription addresses the “ideology solution” of looking for a mediating balance point. One could imagine peasants organizing into a union and demand for better terms of servitude! Of course, we know that neither side sought such a middle ground. The ethnographic evidence shows clearly that binaries have only

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5 The story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, told by Pliny the Elder, is this. Two famous painters enter into a duel where each submits a mural to be judged by experts. Zeuxis paints a bowl of fruit so realistic that a bird flies into the wall and breaks its neck. Thinking there could surely be no proof of exactitude better than this “natural” sign, the judges ask Parrhasius to draw back the curtain covering his entry, but (after a pause) the painter reveals that his submission is in fact a painting of a curtain. Lacan comments on this story in his Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis (op. cit., 103, 111–112), noting that Parrhasius had, by including the medium that the spectator customarily “rules out of the game” in judging framed content, found the subjective tell, the vulnerable breach that a trickster might easily exploit. This is akin to the pick-pocket’s use of “body loading” (making an intimate space close to the victim’s body “exterior” to the victim but accessible to the thief). Apollo Robbins, Jason Silva, Jerry Kolber, Trey Nelson, and Michael Nigro, Brain Games [DVD], Season 1 (New Zealand: Madman Entertainment, 2014).
an “uncanny” or obscene — would could almost say a genuinely *Witz*-like — solution. During a period of the year associated with anticipating a final period of ritualized starvation before the growing season, a banquet was celebrated to mark the hinge between winter and summer. All were required to wear identical dominoes, costumes that, from head to toe, concealed the identities of the wearers. At the same time, copulation was mandatory. Nine months after these unions, new births would celebrate a randomization of the gene pool and prevent the nobles, who were so fastidious about their genealogies, from dying out. Here, costumes took on the role of a collective curtain where identity underwent a $J=J', J\neq J'$ effect. The social group, the material representation of subjects as Symbolic, renewed its “Symbolic-ness” through an “obscene supplement” that allowed the ideological binary of master and servant to survive at least one year longer.

Looking for the death drive here is not difficult. It is the “obscene supplement,” the interval of eclipse that allows for the self-identity within the Symbolic to persist as (also) mis-identification, $J=J$. It is what resists the Symbolic and, hence, is allied with the Real. But, at the same time, it is what allows the Symbolic — and subjectivity along with it — to function. This “part that is not a part” has both (1) a physical scale dysfunction related to inside-outside status and self-reference situations; and (2) a social scale dysfunction that allows it to be, on one hand, intensely private and personal, as a symptom resisting interpretation of a clinical subject, and on the other hand a public function that is not simply “shared” but a *collective universal*. Both qualities relate to Lacan’s “extimity” idea — “intimate externality” and “externalized intimacy” are two sides of the same coin, a coin we have already met in the uncanny paradigms of the living person haunted by death and the dead person who has forgotten how to die. So, we know in advance that we are talking not about two different things but two different perspectives that, one allowed to find a proper “alignment,” can both speak acoustically (*apophrades*) and see that which is “open to be revealed” (*kenosis*). In other words, the death drive finds its voice and vision once it finds its proper meridian line, and this meridian line (I claim) is the death dream.


Sound and light — there is no shorter definition of cinema, which is our closest cultural/technical analog to the dream.6 In the dream, we are semi-paralyzed (we will use the term “cataleptic” for specific reasons made clear later on), and the darkness of dreams is mimicked by the darkened movie theater auditorium, where we rest in our seats until the end of the film. We don’t have to move, the camera dissociates our eye from our body, it is an “organ without a body,” and uses motion

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6 Cinema has been compared to dreaming for quite some time and by some influential people. Réné Claire cited the dream-like state cinema induces, and André Breton described the mental state of film-watching as between waking and sleeping. The passivity of the audience is qualified by this in-between state, where a “just before” being fully awake there is still the ability to consciously recognize something that belongs to the unconscious before subsuming it within the symbolic. The fast-fading desire of film is thus possibly the real subject of Auguste Rodin’s sculpture of Orpheus and Eurydice, with Orpheus shading his eyes and Eurydice close but not touching him as she follows in his failed attempt to rescue her from Hades. “Oneiric Film Theory,” *Wikipedia*; accessed October 2016, URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneiric_(film_theory).
to simulate, above all, the floating sensation that is the essence of the dream even when the dream is not about flying.

(Acoustmatic) voice and gaze, the two “Lacanian” drives — there is no shorter definition of the way the death drive accomplishes its circuit of desire, its resistance to domestication by the Symbolic and, hence, delay of the subsumption of the subject as subject by the mis-recognition of identity, $1=1$, the ideological house of cards in fragile readiness for the wind of the Witz, where the subject must undergo hysterical travel from the first death to the second, through an invisible realm, Hades, i.e. katabasis.

In cinema’s alliance with dreams, and in its particular ability to activate and mobilize the energies of the (off-screen) voice and gaze, we have the perfect laboratory to project an “ersatz” theory about subjectivity. This theory is intended to provoke and is not initially constructed to convince. It does not have the audience's interests in mind to the extent that it tailors the experiment so that the results will fall within the horizon of what is already visible and readily understandable. Rather, it intends to stir up issues that are layered with conventional logic “to keep ideology happy.”

My experiment involves contrasting the waking and sleeping states in terms of discourse, or more specifically the forms taken by consciousness and its bordering state, unconsciousness. I use the term “form” in a portable way. Discourse can take form, as Lacan is famous for showing, but there is also the form of the work of art, the form of a story, the form of a cultural practice. There may be a limited sense in which we can compare these different forms by considering how, as forms, they manage the exchanges of things and energies required to continue a “state” that sustains whatever the form forms. To give an example, the feudal system of Medieval Europe required a form to sustain the binary of master and servant. Lacking any middle ground, the “solution” involved a topology that allowed the circulation of the two opposed energies in a way that created the cross-inscribed condition whose apotheosis was the carnival, mentioned above. Lacan's matheme shows how this happened. $S1/S$ is usually read as the master-servant hierarchical relationship, the master above the servant, $. The servant's bondage is represented by the bar, but as Hegel helped Lacan articulate, this bar is also the subject's ability to exist within two modalities at the same time. The irony of the master is, in Hegel's parable of the master and servant, that the master cannot obtain undiluted respect from his equals, only from those whose indenture automatically disqualifies them from authentic respect. But, the servant turns out to be the sustaining force in the system. The $S$ is in the position of truth, and the subject's two modalities allow it to be automatons within the Symbolic system of feudalism but, at the same time, have sole access to the jouissance of production and the knowledge of how to sustain the masters.

On the other side of the matheme, knowledge, $S2$, conceals beneath it, as a productive force, this jouissance, which rewards the servants for enlarging it beyond the needs and commands of the masters, who themselves know nothing. $S2/α$ is the register of Góngoresque elaboration, as was made clear by the testimony of the garrulous, joyful baker in Carlo Ginzburg's study, The Cheese and the Worms. When the form of the master “rotates” to the University discourse, $S2$ dominates the master: $S2/S1$, and the masters must operate behind the scenes. The counter-clockwise movement of consecutive elements is correlated to the cultural shift from feudalism to modernity; but it is also an evolutionary step in the role of the Symbolic and its construction of subjectivity, from an irony of enjoyment possessed by the subalterns to an

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7 The acousmatic voice owes its Lacanian credentials to film theory, as the classic device of the off-screen narration. See the classic study by Michel Chion, with Claudia Gorbman, The Voice in Cinema (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
irony of enjoyment repossessed by masters, who operate from a “defective” position — i.e. their defect is their “truth” status.

If history involves a change of form, presumably not just of discourse but social institutions, conventions, political structures, etc., then what of the form of the dream? Do dreams change as well? Certainly the features of dreams change, just as the subjects and characters of fiction change, but in this change something remains the same — the dynamic, the essential character, the functions of love and hate. The dream's antagonism to the specific forms of the everyday, Medieval or modern, is an antagonism towards the structures of mastery. They address “masters” who either know nothing or attempt to manipulate knowledge from behind the scenes. This is the discourse of the Hysteric, whose break-down refuses to be situated within extrinsic causes — i.e. the clinical hysteric complains of a pain that has no organic cause, but the pain is nonetheless real. The hysteric reorganizes her body to reflect a reverse causality: from body>symptom to symptom>body.