the L-scheme (Lacan)

In the late 1950s, Lacan began characterizing his psychoanalytical theory through diagrams. He developed a systematic ‘algebra’ using symbols for the Big Other, the subject, etc. and open-ended relationships such as the ‘matheme’ (poinçon, Ø). The first schema was designated as the L-scheme because it resembled the upper case Greek letter, lambda.

1. the axial relationships

Dylan Evans explains that the main point of the schema is to show the relationship between the Other and the subject, a ‘symbolic relationship’, is blocked by the axis connecting the ego and the specular image, an ‘imaginary relationship’. The discourse between the subject and the Other thus arrives in an interrupted and inverted form. The subject ‘hears’ from the Other the message that he/she has sent himself/herself, but in an inverted form. This was of useful in analysis, because the analyst must usually intervene in the symbolic rather than the imaginary register. Lacan used the four elements of the scheme to group and discuss the types of relations encountered in treatment.

Lacan used other schemas (R, I, etc.) but the L-scheme stands as the fundamental one. The others appear only once in his work. It can be argued that the L-scheme lays the groundwork for his more sophisticated later topological speculations.


2. simplification

The zig-zag simplification of the L-scheme is interesting in its connection of the other (a) as object-cause of desire and as subjective ego. In boundary language terms, this a’ is the ‘fictim’ (f), which is the subject’s fantasy projection of an idealized point of view. Where in Lacan’s scheme this consistently represents the ego, it can in boundary language terms also represent an Other with whom the subject identifies and/or wishes to appear (Ø). The fictim permits a mirror reversal of Lacan’s scheme so that the rectangular diagram more easily divides into an ‘objective’ component and a ‘subjective’ component.

The use of fantasy projection may be confusing for any direct comparison to Lacan’s various versions of the phallus, represented by the same letter; but in this case the confusion can be constructive, since in the boundary language diagram Ø has to do with projecting and appearing as well as identification of a point of view. The Ø can also find literal manifestations, as in Hitchcock’s Vertigo, where Scotty must climb a monastery tower to confront the spectral nun and mystery of the double agent, Madeleine/Judy. The zig-zag nearly replicates the film’s logic as Scotty (S) realizes the meaning of the fabricated jewel (a) on Judy’s dresser, which undermines her role as the ‘real’ Madeleine (a’), manipulated by the Big Other, the industrialist-murderer, Gavin Elster.

3. Hitchcock’s ‘Vertigo’ as paradigm

Vertigo’s ‘perfect fit’ allows a retro-fitting of the L-scheme to correspond to the boundary language diagram (BoLaGram). Just as prying open the L-scheme of ‘The Sandman’ led to an articulation of the two themes of contractual exchange and optics, Vertigo’s four elements ‘open up’ the relationships that pivot around the jewel. The jewel was a fake copied from a portrait of the deceased Hispanic beauty, Carlotta Valdez. Scotty is lured into Elster’s murder plot, which involves hiring Judy to impersonate his wife and appear to be possessed by Carlotta’s spirit. Scotty thinks he has rescued her from madness, but she lures him to a Colonial monastery, where Elster has concealed himself and his real wife in a tower. Just as Judy climbs to the top and hides, Scotty ‘witnesses’ the fall of the real wife and believes she has committed suicide on account of her madness. Recovering from the trauma, he finds a shop girl who resembles Madeleine and pursues her, persuading her to be remade in the likeness of Madeleine. In her apartment he discovers the jewel, the Deleuzian ‘demark’, which is Real precisely because it is a fake, just as Judy is Real precisely because SHE is fake!

The revised L-scheme shows how the contractual relationship between Scotty and Elster (the symbolic relationship), afforded a Ø-projection of Madeleine (who ‘really was’ Judy) that created an anamorphic line of action in the film.

Jewels, cigarette lighters, rings, keys and other small precious objects work well as ‘object-causes of desire’ because their value is ‘inestimable’ and beyond their function and materiality.