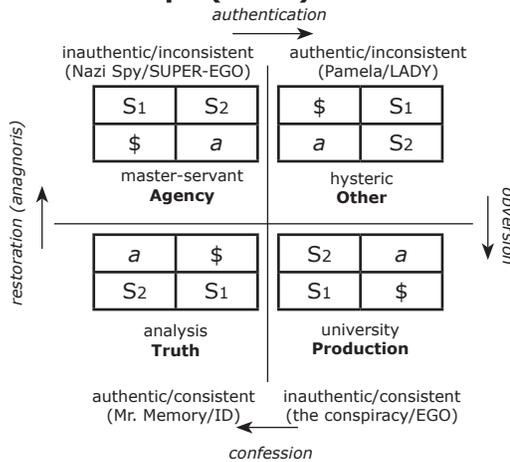


Lacanian discourses as dramatic operators

Slavoj Žižek has proposed (*Tarrying with the Negative*, 274) regarding the four Lacanian forms of discourse as characters encountered in a single work of art. The dramatic relations between the characters thus allow for stages of dramatic development that, correlated to the relations connecting the discourses, reveal a new level of discursive experience. The new values required by organizing the discourses themselves as a series (master, hysteric, university, analysis) — authenticity and consistency — play out as the discourses “rotate” 360°. The dynamic between the inconsistent, inauthentic Master-as-discourse and the inconsistent but authentic Hysteric is, for example, one of authentication. Whether this authentication is successful or failed or in itself inauthentic is an open matter. The Hysteric “obverts” to the symmetrically opposite condition of the University: both inconsistent and inauthentic, as if the Master’s bad faith had been carried forward. The final turn of the screw is the revenge of truth, in the form of Analysis, on the false positions of the Master. The Master’s inauthenticity and inconsistency are dissolved by the authenticity and consistency of Analysis. It is as if the system of discourse itself is an example of the famous Lacanian “gapped circle,” with the square-wave result that the gap is either comedic or tragic, a “retroaction” that fuels the previous stages with a negative presence (i.e. a metonymical “absence” resonating at a distance), a distant tune in the head of those who will bring the work to completion, just as Richard Hannay in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* remembers a dance-hall tune that draws him into a final confrontation with “Mr. Memory.” Another Hitchcock film, *Vertigo* (1958), is used as a confirming example

The 39 Steps (1939)



Numerically $39 > 3+9 > 12 > 1+2 > 3$, the “tell” of the film, is keyed to 40 (buffer, delay) as a key to a field.

Hannay attends a music hall performance, meets a spy who gives him a map and charges him to find an evil German spy posing as a Master in Scotland. Hannah remembers the tune from the dance-hall that introduced the performer, “Mr. Memory,” who it turns out is the envoy who has been trained to smuggle out stolen aircraft design details. The tune drifts in and out of Hannay’s memory and haunts the film “acoustically.”

MASTER>authentication
letter/map/tune

HYSTERIC>obversion
gaze

The action specifies the fates of a “letter” as it escapes the punitive Lacanian gaze, delayed by a “false” union, vindicated with a “true union” when the letter (Mr. Memory’s assignment) is released by the trigger question.

UNIVERSITY>confession
mock/false wedding [gap]

Hannay is implicated in the good spy’s murder and flees to Scotland, where he confronts the German spy, identified by a missing little finger. He escapes the spy but discovers that the police are a part of the Nazi conspiracy. The obversion teams him with a woman who had outed him to the police.

Hannay convinces his companion of the S2/S1 plot; their flight parodies a romantic elopement; the two are handcuffed.

ANALYSIS>anagnorisis
voice

Hannay remembers the unconscious tune.

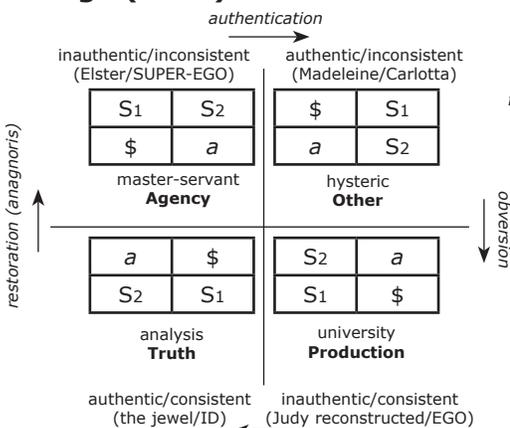
By treating the Palladium scene as the 40th step, Hitchcock realizes—the Lacanian rule of the “letter always arrives at its destination. The 39 Steps in the novel by John Buchan were literal steps, a location of the smuggling transfer point. The echo connecting this point to an earlier instance is Hannay’s charge from a dying British agent who mentions the 39 steps as the name of a group of German spies. It doesn’t occur to him at the time that the name is also a place. In the film, the tune becomes a place, and the phrase “39 steps” becomes the “Open sesame!” password that unlocks Mr. Memory’s secret, which he confesses on stage without being aware of its significance.

MASTER>[judgment]

The film returns to the auditorium setting, this time the London Palladium. Hannay gets Mr. Memory (=unconscious) to confess his role by asking him a question to which Memory must respond as an AUTOMATON. This is the “fortieth step.” 40=gestation/quarantine.

The four Lacanian discourses are embodied in Hitchcock’s 1939 film, *The 39 Steps*, by four “steps” that obey the rules of the Lacanian “partial object.” The principle that “the letter always arrives at its destination” sets up distance and time as a field of delay, across which Hannay will navigate various obstacles, in the form of discursive structures. The first is Pamela, a woman whom he meets on a train while fleeing to Scotland. He eludes the police by forcing her to kiss him, and this mockery of romance sustains the irony of their forced teamship when they meet later. Pamela’s inconsistency supplies comic energy, as the couple escape into the “obverted” landscape ruled by an S1 of authorities who are really spies. They must pretend to “enjoy” each other as a pretended married couple, but they (hysterically) suffer their handcuffed condition (\$, the barred double-subject). The truth (MacGuffin) is that Mr. Memory has been trained to smuggle memorized secrets out of the country, but he is unconscious of their significance. Hannay releases these secrets when he recalls Mr. Memory’s theme-tune, heard during his original music-hall encounter. Asked “What are the 39 steps?” releases Mr. Memory’s memory “automatically.” He repeats the secrets as if they had been mechanically recorded in his brain. 39 “has no meaning” in the sense that it is just a password, the name of the group of spaces or, as in the original novel, the number of steps in a staircase leading to the location of a transfer point. However, the “tell” (sigma value of the digits) of 39 is 3 ($12 > 1+2 > 3$) and three is needed to complete the “quadrature” of analysis (40 as the “thickness” of the “delay” that was the drama of encountered discursive fields).

Vertigo (1958)



Scottie has survived a chase in which a uniformed policeman has fallen to his death. Scottie’s vertigo sublimates the guilt for “letting him down.” Elster persuades Scottie, who has retired, to follow his wife, Madeleine, haunted by her dead ancestress Carlotta. As Madeleine develops this double identity, Scottie falls in love with her (cf. “resistance,” in reversed predication mode), but he falls for the murder of Elster’s real wife, staged at a convent.

MASTER>authentication
fallen policeman theme

HYSTERIC>obversion
gaze

Scottie’s assignment directs the “letter,” his guilt-as-vertigo, to various sites, culminating in the bell tower of the convent. The obversion of the film is the break between its two main episodes, divided by the death of Elster’s wife.

Scottie accidentally encounters a woman who resembles Madeleine (Judy) and befriends her, persuading her to dress and look like the (presumed) dead woman. The gaze is objectified by the mirror in which Judy is returned to her personification of Madeleine.

UNIVERSITY>confession
mock/false wedding [gap]

Scottie discovers the jewel “Madeleine” had worn to mimic the portrait of Carlotta and realizes that he was duped.

ANALYSIS>anagnorisis
voice

Judy WAS the real Madeleine, who did not exist (object-cause of desire).

MASTER>[judgment]

Scottie discovery of the jewel (a) functions as the “tell” that reveals the full deception of the Master, and the plot to use Judy as a “split identity,” which she was in Real terms at the psychoanalytical phase, as Other. The ‘a’ reveals S2, the plot, and the master’s (S1) in constructing Judy.