

The Lacanian Formula for Fantasy

The idea of this review is not to refuse to pay respect to the wealth of commentary and primary writing on Lacan's famous if enigmatic expression for fantasy, $\$ \diamond a$ (translated loosely as "the barred subject stands within a circular relationship to the *objet petit a*, one part of which is determined by alienation, the other by separation"). To understand sufficiently what Lacan means by *objet petit a*, the "object-cause of desire," is in itself a large project. The subject is, by its very nature, "barred" in the sense that the subject is forced to choose between language (and the network of symbolic relationships that language enables) and non-language, which is psychosis — hardly a real choice!

Possibly the most accessible part of the formula is the element that Lacan least defined, the *poinçon*, a mark taken from the stamp made by silversmiths to guarantee the authenticity of materials, \diamond , but in more common use the punch made by the conductor to cancel a train ticket. The *poinçon* can also be written as " $<>$," or "both greater than or less than." This indicates that the normal relations of scale, in time and space, have been violated. The order of before-after and here-there has been rearranged. The boundaries between inside and outside have been blurred. We are "in between" or, more radically, at the exact opposite point (antipode) of where we thought we were.

This \diamond or $<>$ means, according to Lacan, that the subject can take "one of a hundred relationships" with the object-cause(s) of desire — a multiplicity that is afforded by the stability and durability of the \diamond relationship, which is one simultaneously of identity/authenticity and spatial and temporal order. How does this begin to make sense?

Since the formula has two sides, and since the $<>$ aspect of the *poinçon* also refers to the bi-directionality of the alienation and separation that constitute the circuit relationship, we can treat the expression as a kind of mirror that, instead of providing a symmetrically accurate reflection, creates a minimal difference, ∂ , between the two sides. We can also connect this ∂ with gaps, short-circuits, lacks or excesses, remainders, and all forms of error. Thus, alienation is not complemented or corrected by separation; the authenticity and scale functions of the *poinçon* are not symmetrical; and the barred subject is not wholly defined by its relationship to desire. But, it is possible to say that the imprecisions and imbalances of these relationships are based on the small difference, ∂ , that makes possible a near-infinite multiplicity of relationships — something that is essential for cultures to be able to establish durable systems of meanings and relationships in the face of continually changing circumstances and resources. This in effect is the classic "chance and necessity" situation, where one cannot exclude one in favor of the other, or regard the two in conflict, but must instead see how the two are bonded structurally. Contingency and universal structure are, therefore, the guaranteed outcome of $\$ \diamond a$.

Alienation and separation describe the paradoxical two sides of subjectivity. The subject stands in an indeterminate relationship to language. It can seem the the subject is "determined" by language, a product of language; but it has to be admitted that language cannot define *all* of the subject. The subject is represented by signifiers, it seems, but the subject eludes being completely a product of language. Alienation is what the subject must endure by accepting that subjectivity is made possible and supported by language; that entering into language means being assigned a position, an identity, that does not quite fit. The subject is "confused for someone else." In terms of the \diamond , one could say that the situation amounts to $1/\diamond$, or a subordination of authenticity, literally placing it beneath a bar or threshold, a suppression. In other words, \diamond cannot be named by language, but it gives value to what *can* be named, even though it is not state-able or understandable. This is \diamond 's relationship to the Real, which lies outside of the symbolic. It is the empty space that allows contingency to co-exist with determinacy.

In the case of separation, the subject is made to live up to the Other's desires, but information about these desires is incomplete, enigmatic. The subject, after all, is continually misrecognized through the linguistic structures that seem to offer it a place but the place is not quite adequate. What does the Other really want? The subject turns this question around:

What would the Other do without me? The subject fantasizes about his/her own death, a \diamond version of the *poisson*. This absence can be elaborate, as in the folk and literary narratives of travel, where the "hero leaves home" and endures/enjoys a succession of (mis)adventures. Compacted, this travel narrative becomes the *katabasis*, the descent into Hell. The traditions surrounding this "impossible" trip, as well as the cultural elaborations of the underworld, fit with the Lacanian idea of \diamond : "Hades," for example, is literally the Greek word for "invisible." Separation, whose number is 40 ("quarantine"), is related to rituals of purification and trial, as in the forty days of Lent, the 40 days Jesus endured in the desert, etc. The visual counterpart of 40 is the classic labyrinth, a fractal design. Fractals are, by definition, both greater and smaller than themselves, the $\langle \rangle$ aspect of the *poisson*. In death, the soul's separation from the body is also the separation from the transitive orders of space and time that force the body into strict adherence of $>$ and $<$ rules. The labyrinth creates a paradox, being both inside and outside at the same time, a container that contains itself by folding its pathways on themselves. Labyrinth designs are associated with funeral rituals across all cultures.

What is the subject? The circuit of separation and alienation could be put in mathematical terms, where the \diamond of separation is "joined," in a circular structure, to the $1/\diamond$ of alienation. This is a loose comparison, since alienation and separation are not complementary, let alone equal, but the result of this equation relationship is $\sqrt{-1}$, or i . In terms of mathematics, the same kind of impasse is reached that subjectivity reaches in its attempt to complete the circuit of alienation and separation: an "impossible" Real: authenticity out of falsity, an escape from the limitations of scale. Let's look more closely at the 'a' of the $\diamond a$ expression. The "object-cause of desire" caption for this element can be taken literally: there is an element of (1) objectivity — i.e. the a is an object of some kind; and an element of (2) causality. As an object, the a is a "subjective object," an object that relates uniquely to the condition and status of the barred subject. The a is not simply an example of desire, it is the embodiment and also the *cause* of it, a self-contained package, where the condition requiring the object is supplied by the object itself. An example of this is the contemporary soft-drink, whose chemical composition creates the thirst it pretends to satisfy. Desire is short circuited. It is not created by absence, as in the case of the poor person who is hungry for a good meal, which is not to be had, but rather by presence. The object itself is a presence that creates an absence, a lack that is simultaneously a satisfaction of that lack.

The a should also be considered as a "part" or "partial" object, a member of the special species begun by Freud and extended by Lacan: the breast, feces, the phallus, the gaze, and the voice (the last two have special meanings, defined by Lacan but misunderstood by most others, including Derrida). These objects "come with" their own systems of converting the space and time around them, so to speak. They are objects of the margin and margins themselves. They are like vanishing points that have been imported into the center of things without losing their status as vanishing points. Like the black holes of quantum physics, they are the internal defects of space and time, the 'R2' versions of the Real, portable "revolutions in a box." In David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Rita has a blue metal box that, when opened by a triangular blue mental key, sucks the entire Rita-Betty narrative into its void. Jorge Luis Borges was fond of describing columns containing voices or small coins or stones of "infinite weight," heavy because, though small, were the boundary of another universe of which they were the outer face. Topologically speaking, they "had us surrounded." There is a great tradition surrounding such objects, which obey the logic of Pascal's God whose "center was everywhere and circumference nowhere." In the case of the partial object, the center is anywhere and the circumference is the one we think that bounds the object but actually bounds us.

The barred subject relates uniquely to the partial object of desire, in that this object is a perfect companion for the body's (metonymical) status as a puzzle, a collection of parts that defies unification. Here, the poetic metaphors of the body allow a comparison of organs with cosmic/theological functions. The heart is the seat of passion; the brain the locus of judgment; the hands the servants of agency, etc. There is no settled or certain mapping, however, of function to part. As William Broxton Onians discovered, the Greeks and other ancient peoples had a variety of views about what happened where in the body. The soul was divided into (at least) three parts, associated with the breath, with consciousness, with passions. Perception

was sometimes located in the chest. Genius, as etymology suggests, circulated between the head and the knees. The ancients were “good Lacanians” in refusing to give the body any metaphoric consolidation. The body was a system for circulating and re-ordering “metonymic” parts, as an economy of exchanges, temporary balances, and secret passwords and handshakes. The Lacanian “body in pieces” was a component of the mirror stage theory. When a young child passes by a mirror at a key point in his/her development, the recognition of the specular image as a superior model of the ego is revolutionary. The young subject sees a unified, masterful self, a self already situated within a network of symbolic relationships. In contrast, his/her “real self” in front of the mirror is retroactively realized to be a “body in pieces,” a metonymic collection of incongruous, un-unified and un-coordinated parts. Up to this point, the young subject had not experienced any problems with his/her metonymical body-in-pieces, but the competing image in the mirror reverses this and re-temporalizes the situation so that the future will be a “future anterior” — a point in the future “by which time” the subject will have achieved mastery — and that the past is reconstructed in terms of the lacks which the subject only now has realized.

The $\$$ of $\$ \diamond a$ retains this metonymical handicap, but it is a handicap wholly tied up with the spatial and temporal perplexities of the ‘a’, the partial object, whose complex topology imports, into the center of things, the logic of the periphery, the wilderness, the forbidden *terra incognita*. The $-\diamond$ and $1/\diamond$ qualities of the circuit also constitute a short-circuit, where privation and prohibition are exchanged and alienation and separation introduce a permanent “parallax view” within the heart of subjectivity. The ‘a’ element, the partial object — and especially its weird topological properties relating periphery to center — help us understand the relationships that maintain this short-circuit and permanent parallax.

First, the function of privation can be considered from its purely “phallic” aspect: presence and absence, an oscillating “square-wave” function (\square) that has no middle ground, no transition, between its two states. This is the “pop-up” quality of the anamorphic image. It does not appear gradually but suddenly. Once we are in the position to see it emerge from the blurry background, it immediately forms itself in front of our eyes. The phallic quality of this appearance-disappearance ability seems to be related to its function as a prohibitive marker. In the ancient world, it was *precisely* the phallic herms that were used as property stones. To move or disfigure these markers was punishable by death. They indicated the sacred inviolable space of tombs, agricultural fields, temples — i.e. not the secular precincts of houses whose security was maintained by ordinary gates and doors but the spaces open to the easy trespass of strangers. Why was this kind of prohibition (“silent,” “unenforced”) *especially* the job of the phallic (privational) herm? Isn’t the herm a succinct and historical example of the $\$ \diamond a$ formula: “the subject is restricted from passing across the boundary of the *a* — an internal, miniaturized version of the edge of the cosmos, whose violation is, like the cosmic boundary, a matter of life and death”? The herm as a partial object naturally bars the subject. Its privational qualities make it perfect as a protector from the intrusions of subjects, whom it *prohibits* precisely on the grounds of its spatial, topological inversions ($1/\diamond$). The \diamond is always, in this sense, a $-\diamond$ that is simultaneously a partial object imported from the edge of the university, a $1/\diamond$.