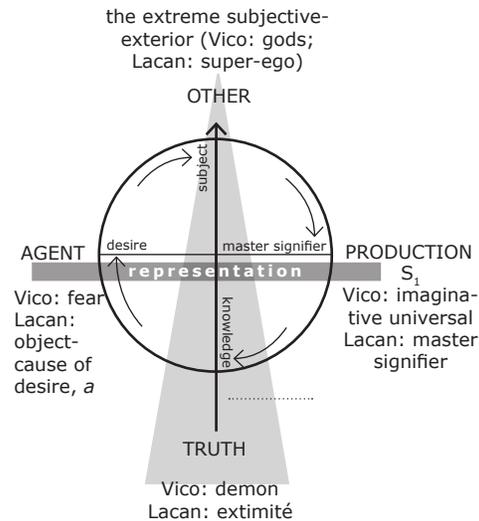


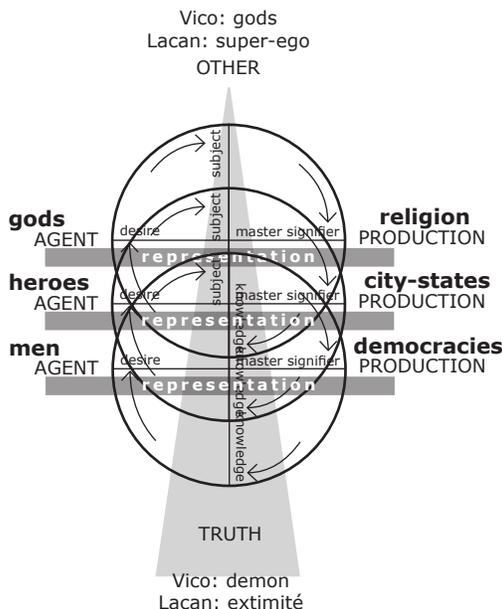
the vico-lacan connection

donald kunze • art3idea.psu.edu/boundaries/

What if Western thought's two most original thinkers actually 'coincided' on many if not most points of their theories of humanity? This thesis argues that Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), viewed 'topologically', is the unrecognized precursor of Jacques Lacan; and that Lacan succeeds in refitting Vico's *New Science* for modern and post-modern mentalities. Significantly, both thinkers are linked through the devices of the uncanny: internal boundaries and frames, the role of the voice, and the reversal of Enlightenment dichotomies.



The position of the hysteric, for Vico, is essential for understanding the position of the first humans who, frightened by thunder, projected their own nature on to the sky which, as the body of a god (Jove), intended to say something through signs of light and sound. Both Vico and Lacan reverse the inside/outside schema of mind and body, holding that truth (mind) is 'out there', transposed by metaphoric consciousness as intentionality of objects, which conceal the truth in their imagined inaccessible interiors (extimité).



Vico creates a *gradus* or ratio out of the hysterical inversion of space, gradually 'secularizing' the subjectified Other into a interiorized objective (and transitive) world, nonetheless troubled by residuals (Lacan's extimité; Žižek's gap) which can be also thematized as the exception, the homo sacer (Agamben), the feminine 'not-all', the supplement, or the excess. For Vico, the gap is the unmediated body, or 'monster', one of the categories of ancient divinatory signs.

1. the humanly human: a thinking machine

Rather than argue that computers are gradually approaching the ability to think 'humanly', Vico would have argued that the idea of a thinking machine is already embedded in human nature — that 'mind' is already and always an artificial construct. In contrast to the modern identification of mind with internal neural activities, both Lacan and Vico hold that the mind is 'out there', a transposition of qualities into natural substances and other subjects. This externality is constructed in terms of a (1) dimensionality/topography that is simultaneously a system of 'topics', (2) an interiority concealed by appearances that convert privation into prohibition (natural limits of experience into injunctions not to pry into certain aspects of nature, etc.) and (3) a productive middle, constituted by representations (language, models, ideas, etc.) that operates as a primary boundary 'cutting across' the relationship between a position of subjectivity (the observer, the subject) and a position of objectivity, portrayed as a defective relationship in need of belief, providence, induction, or some other form of intervention. Defect, by which privation (a limit of the senses) is converted to prohibition (interpellation not to transgress certain limits), necessitates contingency, accident, and imperfection by which a topological exchange between inside and outside (which are themselves conditioned by the exchange) invests both subjective and objective structures with their own 'demonic' interiorities.

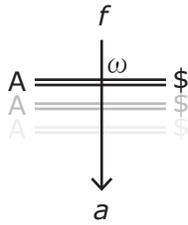
2. who's on first?

With Lacan, the order of primary elements is central. Desire (a), the subject (\$), the master signifier (S₁), and knowledge (S₂) do not vary in their continual sequences: S₁, S₂, a, \$, S₁, S₂, a Equally unvarying is the sequence of positions: Agent, Other, Production, and Truth. Together, the sequences form a wheel within a wheel, elements 'rotating' between fixed positions. Normally, each position is marked as a kind of discourse and notated, for example, as S₁/\$ → S₂/a (the discourse of the Master-Servant). By adopting these two sequences to concentric circles suggests, however, that Lacan's scheme becomes more of a real topography in Vichian terms. For Vico, exteriority begins with the (defective) perception of the thunder as a word that is *not understood*. It is the empty center, a point of privation, that by becoming prohibition (the word is 'sacred') gains its status as a true language; and it is by the position of this central void (it is a 'precise center') that other positions — the subject, nature as object, places of authority, etc., can be *located* and *mapped out* as a landscape of relations. The interchange between topics as mental constructs and *topoi* as physical locations is common to both Vico and Lacan, the latter of whom famously argued that the mind was a topology of relationships governing, among other things, symbolic reality, the imaginary, and the Real. Vico's approach allows the distinction between 'domain', where metaphor extends a pervasive 'divine' nature throughout space and time, and 'field', a construct of isolating this nature in order to operate instrumentally (transitive space and time) through tropes of metonymy and irony (formalism and mechanism).

Both the philosopher Vico and psychoanalyst Lacan rely on a topographical/topological model that transposes thought to an exterior condition, where limitation/privation becomes a gap, an 'extimé', that can be approached best through the phenomena and traditions of 'the uncanny', where stable distinctions are blurred through such devices as suture, exception, the feminine 'not-all' of Lacan, the remainder, the excess. Where Derrida addresses the matter of the supplement and Agamben the idea of the *temenos*, no other thinkers besides Vico and Lacan have comprehensively developed a system of topological relationships that can be adopted by the 'spatial sciences'.

3. the devil in the details

Although both Vico and Lacan are notoriously difficult to comprehend (both, even, are continually criticized for their obscure-sounding manner of speaking), the system of topological positions allows their work to be penetrated once a 'master key' has been discovered. This master key is not a fact or truth, or even a central theory, but rather a style of thinking that allows the reader of Vico and Lacan to make progress through a series of imperfect and even sometimes seriously flawed approximations. Because there is no possibility of grasping perfectly what Vico or Lacan 'really meant', the only productive method of study involves error, unavoidable misrepresentation, and occasionally inadvertent distortion that reveals, though progressive consideration of all aspects of these thinkers' positions, insight through the process of belated correction. The adoption



The relation between exteriorized subject and interiorized object is materialized by an 'anamorphic' cut-across, established as a 'representation' (language, image, model, concept, etc.) that functions as an 'operator' connecting ('orthogonally') the interests of description, which is intransitive because of the anamorphic condition, and the interests of the A/\$ 'network of symbolic relationships, such as paradigms, religions, cultures, etc., which are transitive in the sense that they are regulated by exchange. Nonetheless, systems of exchange are characterized by gaps, surpluses, and other remainders that qualify and maintain them by being permanently surplus to the 'law' of the system.

of Lacan's four discourses to a concentric circle model, and the overlay of that model on to such structures as the Enlightenment 'cone of vision' is one such approximation calling for correction.

This method embraces from the start the idea that 'unworking' can begin with a result (for example, the product of ideology, the Lacanian 'master signifier') and work backwards through the process to its productive origin. (The master signifier converts contingencies to causes, so by reversing the process we can understand how contingencies are structured in order to become 'ideological' universal perceptions.) Similarly, with the dichotomous constructs of the Enlightenment, intended to banish the 'uncanny' effects of religion, superstition, and culture, a reversed study reveals the pre-Enlightenment 'uncanny' that formed the original problem that Enlightenment rationality sought to correct.

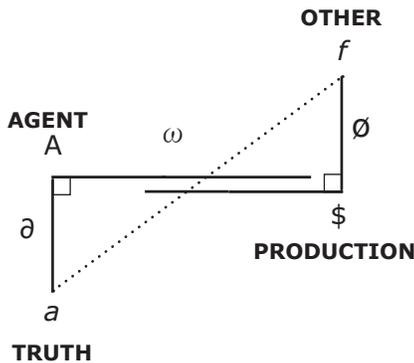
4. Vico's topography

Vico's thinking has been popularized as a theory that culture evolves through a series of three stages: an age of the gods where substances appear demonic, an age of heroes where representational thinking begins to stabilize the world in terms of things and attributes, and an age of thoroughly secularized mentality able to use space and time instrumentally, through technological manipulation. The 'gods/heroes/men' mantra obscures several important dimensions of Vico's thinking. The first is that human mentality, at its 'weakest', assumes the strongest possible relationship with the cosmos: equal terms with 'gods' who govern all things. When cognition has refined itself, however, it portrays its position as inferior to even mechanical relationships. Hence, computers are characterized as 'superior thinking machines' even though their complexity is less than a millionth of the human brain's.

Vico portrayed this 'fall' in terms of a ratio connecting the heavens (absolute exteriority) to earth (absolute interiority) and compared it to a sublime dimension lying within thought itself. He described this dimension in terms of personal and general difficulty — the labor of discovering the secret of mythic thought, for example — as well as in the transformational pleasure to be experience by the reader who, by discovering this dimension him/herself in effect becomes the writer of *The New Science*.

This vertical dimension (cf. Hitchcock's use of the vertical to create conditions of hysteria) becomes the construct of an imagined point of view, idealized at the apex as subjective but maximally exterior; with a concealed center, an absolutely objective interiority, lying opposite. This is the dimension of imagination, \emptyset , and the subjective 'top' and objective 'bottom' reverse the usual inside/outside model of consciousness but repeat Lacan's assertion (in Slavoj Žižek's words) that 'the truth is out there'.

Vico conceives of this \emptyset as a-symbolic and thus un-symbolizable, but it nonetheless can be materialized through a 'cut across' that, like any distinction, momentarily stabilizes a set of relationships that can be substituted for a true view. In this defective substitute, history has established definitive discursive practices: the Enlightenment distinction, the scientific 'cross-section', the ancient *templum* and ritual sacrifice. Like the architectural/anatomical section, an interiority is made exterior through a fiction of graphic penetration. That this is a *model for all representation* is Vico's key insight. Lacan might further label this cut as a dialectic between an Agent and Production, where authority is established to 'interpellate' (control though voluntary subjection) subjects with networks of symbolic relationships. Because these networks are transitive, they can only approximate and falsify the 'intransitive' structures of the \emptyset and its relations between f , the idealized exterior subjective, and a , the idealized interior objective.



The Möbius-band nature of the bolagram 'solves for' the rotating conditions of Lacan's four discourses. Labels of vertices give an approximate idea of the relations of terms, *vis-à-vis* their relative positions, but any element can occupy any position in the diagram. The shape and general configuration correspond to Lacan's idea of 'place', namely the four places of agent, other, production, and truth. The 'exteriorized subject' is the Other (f) while the 'interiorized object' is Truth, epitomized by the object-cause of desire, a .

