Concealment, Delay, and Topology in the Creation of Wondrous Drawing

Abstract

The architectural drawing uses surface effects to set up, in the imagination, a symmetry between spaces of reception and locales of presentation. The drawing could be considered as a ‘thinking machine’ whose surpluses and gaps create openings for ingenium, metaphoric constructs that involve not just witty ideas but structural duets between subjects and objects, here’s and there’s, now’s and then’s.

This graphic practice amounts to an ‘anamorphic’ mode of perception through concealment. To understand the drawing process, the study of cinema can provoke new angles of inquiry, particularly in the case of directors who ‘storyboard’ their plots, framing scenes as ‘emblems’. In particular, Alfred Hitchcock’s films provide ample evidence of dynamic anamorphosis on behalf of meanings that are created in advance of their arrival on screen. Hitchcock’s intuitive and prescient use of the ‘MacGuffin’ — a gratuitous detail, which underwrites the audience’s imaginative movement into the work of art — summarizes the wit of the architectural drawing as a strategy of concealment and delay.

Mad Paper

Most projections eventually cease to be projections. This can be as simple a matter as intended or unintended destruction — holding a match to a map, or using a newspaper to wrap fish. The more interesting case is where this end is also the end, the limit, of the idea of projection. There’s the funny situation of the country described by Jorge Luis Borges, where the rage for accurate maps
led to drawing them at 1:1 scale.\footnote{1} The result was that this perfect map covered the whole country and consequently became useless. Borges may have simply intended to lampoon the correspondence theory of truth, but he raised an interesting question: what exactly would this ‘end of representation’ be like?

This question has occurred to thoughtful artists of other ages. John Donne felt that it was necessary to persuade the paper he used to write his poems to put up with the more extreme of his authorial ambitions. In his poem, ‘To Mrs. M. H.’, he wrote:\footnote{2}

\begin{verbatim}
Mad paper stay, and grudge not here to burne
With all those sonnes whom my braine did create,
At lest lye hid with mee, till thou returne
To rags againe, which is thy native state.
\end{verbatim}

Donne’s paper is apparently threatening to walk off the job; but, when instruments of representation rebel against their masters, aren’t they simply living up to representation’s claim to imitate life? If representation holds to its goal of exactitude, shouldn’t it accept the unintended consequences of animated and empowered artifacts, which, once they gain a mind of their own, have other plans? Doesn’t the ‘end of representation’, theoretically and anecdotally, involve the creation of a Golem, a Frankenstein? ‘Mad paper’, when it gets really mad, rebels not just against the author but authorship in general; not just against a particular assigned role, but against the whole idea of intentionality in representation.

The Russian author of Black Snow, Mikhail Bulgakov (1968), suggests that this radical failure of intentionality might be more entertaining than what intentionality first had in mind. Having completed what he feels to be a bland novel, the novelist-narrator notices that the pages of his book have turned into a 1930s version of a video screen:\footnote{3}
I began to feel that something colored was emerging from the white pages. After staring at it and screwing up my eyes I was convinced that it was a picture — and a picture that was not flat but three-dimensional like a box. Through the lines on the paper I could see a light burning and inside the box those same characters in the novel were moving about. It was a delightful game and more than once I regretted that my cat was dead and there was no one to whom I could show these people moving about in that tiny little room.

It is quite amazing that Bulgakov seems to have anticipated the age of the word processor, where the screen has taken over the job of the paper, sometimes as an intermediary, sometimes as an outright usurper. Mad pixels, stay!

The Inside Gap

To make this clear, let me try to define the function of this ‘wondrous’ artifact residing inside the representation process, the paper or pixels ‘with an attitude’. An extreme but most definitive case would be the controversial ‘Shroud of Turin’, reputed to be the original cover of the prone corpse of Christ. Its cloth retains a direct transfer of what seems to be a body image. This ectoplasmic transfer collapses the sagittal distance of projection between representation and the represented. When the sagittal collapses, its related interests fail, such as the convention of authorial contrivance. No distance, no dissembling; hence, authenticity. But, is it possible to simulate this collapse inside the work of art, as a carefully laid trap? And, more important, can this ‘end of representation’, though purposefully planned, still lead to an experience of authenticity?

In Alfred Hitchcock’s well known film, Vertigo (1958), Scotty, a retired policeman recovering from a traumatic event involving falling, is doing a favor for an acquaintance, Gavin Elster, well-to-do owner of a ship-construction company. The magnate asks Scotty to follow his wife, Madeleine,
who, Elster fears, is in danger of a nervous breakdown. She seems obsessed with the idea that she is the reincarnation of a long-dead Latina, Carlotta Valdez. Scotty agrees to take the job. He follows Madeleine around, spying on her as she sits in an art museum before Carlotta's portrait, spends time in the boarding house that was Carltta's home, and takes flowers to Carlotta's grave. Finally, he intercedes in her attempted suicide beneath the San Francisco Bay Bridge. He is fascinated by the beautiful Madeleine and begins to half-believe in her fantasy. Now playing the role of the tragic lover, Madeleine leads Scotty to an old Spanish monastery. Because of his fear of heights, he fails to prevent her fatal jump from the bell tower. Scotty is devastated.

Weeks later, Scotty encounters a woman who bears a striking resemblance to Madeleine. He pursues and finally confronts her. Judy, a shop-girl living in a cheap apartment, is a tawdry version of Madeleine. Nonetheless, he is unable to relinquish his obsession. Judy reluctantly allows him to remake her in the image of the dead Madeleine. Scotty, however, discovers a piece of jewelry that had actually belonged to Madeleine — a ruby necklace just like the one in Carlotta's portrait in the museum. He realizes that the shop-girl was hired to play the part of the wife, enacting the presumed delusion by visiting the museum and cemetery and by attempting suicide to cover up the real murder of the real wife. Elster had established his innocence with the fake backstory of suicidal delusion. Scotty forces Judy to return to the monastery to replay the murder scene; this time the fake takes the fall.

The epistemology of Vertigo is quite complex. Analysis must begin with the recognition of the anamorphic functionality of the ‘Judy-Madeleine’ device. This is an ‘appearance machine’, which operates from inside Vertigo, sustaining all of its dramatic organisms. Judy is the artifact behind the created mask of Madeleine. Be careful, however. Madeleine is not a ‘copy’ of Elster's wife but a creation made only to engage Scotty. She's like some other Hitchcock creations, such as the spy, Kaplan, in North by Northwest (1959), a fictional invention of the CIA maintained to distract KGB spies. When an advertising executive, Walter Thornhill, is mistaken for Kaplan by the
Russians, he can't prove his innocence because his double doesn't exist. This anamorph is 'pure' — not the distortion of some authentic original but the creation of the Real out of a durable difference. It is the distilled essence of the famous Hitchcockian ‘MacGuffin’ — a ‘gratuitous’ invention required to justify the audience’s interest. In the case of Vertigo, the audience is Scotty.

To use a mathematical analogy, ‘Judy-Madeleine’ is an ‘operator’ with the same zero-degree status as Kaplan. In the main plot, she — or ‘they’? (Isn’t it time for James Joyce’s ‘twone’?) — facilitates the ruse of engaging Scotty to be the credible witness of Madeleine’s ‘suicide’. Elster can set up the death of his wife at the tower of the monastery because he knows in advance that Scotty will be traumatized by the climb up the tower stairs. Judy can step into the shadows just before the real wife is pushed out. The Janusian monster, Judy-Madeleine, is a dramatic device, but it’s important to recognize the anamorphic function. Judy is able to play Madeleine in the main ruse, where her sophistication seems genuine. When Judy is discovered later, however, she can’t scrub off her shop-girl persona. Her speech is common, her gestures rough. Despite our knowledge that she is in fact the original article, the difference is the anamorphic insulation that keeps Scotty from discovering the truth. Paradoxically, this failure establishes something like a ‘super-identity’ — a durable ideal of the self based on a complete ‘lack of substance’!

The anamorphic function oscillates between extreme ‘off-on’ settings. It has no mediating middle values, no compromise. It’s either Judy or Madeleine. This is important, since the Judy-Madeleine machine keeps ‘ruse plot’ (Scotty in love with Madeleine) from crossing the ‘restoration plot’ (Scotty remaking Judy in Madeleine’s image). Both plots can survive independently as long as the Judy-Madeleine machine is a ‘square wave’ that oscillates between two values without stopping at intermediate values.

The ruse plot (Madeleine’s delusion) is basically a theatrical presentation designed to enchant Scotty. As an ideal audience, Scotty enters fully into the illusion of Madeleine. He is the very model
of the ‘hot detective’, the one who loses perspective by foregoing detachment for direct interaction with the one he is paid to investigate. The ‘Big Other’, to use a term from Lacan, in this ruse plot is the hollow edifice of the murder scheme. By coincidence, the architectural model for this is the hollow square monastery tower with its interior labyrinthine stair. Scotty’s fear of falling paralleled the real wife’s real exterior fall. When Judy slips up by wearing the same necklace she had used as ‘Madeleine’ in her visits to the museum, Scotty realizes that the basis of the ‘plot’ is hollow, that Madeleine ‘does not exist’, that Judy is and was the only Madeleine, constructed to assure his testimony at the inquest of Elster’s truly dead wife.

The Madeleine-Judy machine works from the inside of these dramatic forms, works anamorphically, and is fundamentally optical. Throughout the film, Scotty finds Madeleine and Judy through windows, mirrors, and in museum portraits. She is constantly disappearing-appearing, slipping out, popping up. The theme of appearance is materialized in the jewel, the fake ruby necklace made up to resemble the one in Carlotta’s portrait. It’s a fake, but this only underscores its more powerful status as ‘Real’ with a capital ‘R’! It’s the surplus object par excellence, the item ‘out of place’ that sutures together both the ruse plot and the restoration plot. The Judy-Madeleine machine is the link and key to this suture.

The jewel is a stand-in, an objectification, of Judy, the shop-girl who is the hopeless fake but in fact none other than the authentic ‘wife’. The term ‘real fake’ is best approached with Deleuze’s idea of the demark (1986), the sign that stands out, that does not fit. Other Hitchcockian demarks include the monogrammed cigarette lighter in Strangers on a Train, the belt of the raincoat in Young and Innocent, the windmill turning backwards in The Lady Vanishes, or the downward-growing zinnias in Rear Window. One common quality that hints at the secret of the demark is what Michael Riflettere (1990) called ‘fictional truth’ — a falsehood that, in the right context, becomes insuperably authentic. We’re reminded of the combination of denial and truth that formed the authentic detail for Giovanni Morelli’s theory of art authenticity — picked up by no less a figure
than Sigmund Freud in his formulation of the idea of the unconscious use of the discarded detail as an indicator of psychic truth.

**Just Another Nobody**

The Madeleine/Judy machine works as a ‘zero-degree’ device. It creates an internal, anamorphic ‘face’ that establishes authentic identity (‘whodunit’) by undermining the whole question of identity in a radical way. There is no Madeleine just as there is no Judy, but together they are, as champions of non-existence, ladies of the night where, as Hegel would have put it, ‘all cows are black’. The machine is a hinge between universal (the paragon of beauty, Madeleine) and the particular, Judy, the ‘actual’ actress of flesh and blood hired to play Madeleine. The coupling of such a monstrous form in a single person as a form of antonomasia, the rhetorical figure of the name derived from a quality or a particular person. Hitchcock provides examples of each. In *The 39 Steps* (1935), an otherwise nameless performer is called ‘Mr. Memory’. In the reverse direction, particular to universal, Hitchcock’s famous device, borrowed from Angus McPhail, is the ‘MacGuffin’. The figure of antonomasia shows the role of the name in mediating the universal and particular, the material and the ideal.

The issues of identity, name, and antonomasia are not abstract, however. They arise in literature as questions of the non-person, the nobody, the stranger, the liminal being; in the shadowy background of myth and folklore are the traditions of the period ‘between the two deaths’ — the death of the body and the final rest of the soul. These sources suggest that, for this crucial interval, blindness trumps vision; silence trumps speech; projection is collapsed and touch takes its place. This is where Truth itself speaks, but how?

Stereognosis, ‘knowledge of the world through touch’, can be represented only in terms of topography. An appropriately radical position would be to insist that this topography be forced to
retain its experiential and temporal basis: a sequence of encounters encoded by topographical qualities of ‘contingency’, ‘handedness’ (left-right relations), and mirror-symmetry relationships (the face; the ‘idiotic symmetry’ of self-reference and recursion). Stereognosis might well be the official technical term for the failure of projective representation, and its official emblem might well be the Cretin labyrinth, the meander whose only variable is forward-backward — a reduction of space to the ultimate determination of the face.

Stereognosis, as we might expect, cannot be satisfactorily explained in projective terms. Analogies and examples fall short because they rely on what stereognosis precisely prohibits. Art teaches us, however, that stereognosis can be experienced in encounters that are structured by its logic. This means that the critic-theoretician must occupy the role of the audience and consider the condition of the audience as a constitutive ingredient for all theoretical constructs. The condition of the audience has been formalized through the syllogism known as the ‘enthymeme’. In the zone where philosophy and rhetoric meet, we have the rhetorical syllogism, the ‘If A is B and B is C then A as C’ arrangement of propositions that Medieval logicians classified into nineteen forms, giving them such alluring names as ‘Barbara’ and ‘Camestres’. The rhetorical syllogism, the enthymeme, treats the audience, like Donne’s paper, as both mind and body, universal and particular. First: the audience is sitting in the auditorium thinking ‘now we are to watch something of some importance (or not)’. Second: the audience is disembodied and placed within the work — what film theorists who had read a bit of Lacan came to describe as ‘suture’, or localization of the audience inside a scene or character within the fictional representation.

The syllogism’s classic form can be expressed using the ‘calculus’ of George Spencer-Brown, whose axioms could translate (and correct) Boolean logic into the terms of boundary crossings and ‘calls’. The complex sorites of Lewis Carroll can be dispatched quickly using Spencer-Brown’s notation by identifying ‘silent pairings’ (B and B-cross in the illustration below). The ruse of the interior face, the ‘nobody’, can be visualized through the function of the syllogism, where the
middle term, B, stands for the audience’s relation to the speaker and the speech. B and B-cross are the internal, self-silencing, self-referential Janusian audience; the ‘antonomasia’ that is simultaneously universal and particular (Fig. 1).

It is curious that Spencer-Brown’s calculus uses one symbol, the angle, to represent both a boundary and a ‘call’. In art and literature, spatial division (entrapment, liminal crossings, temporal observations, etc.) is frequently coupled with the magical or ironic use of the name. Doors open with a magical word; an enemy is admitted under false pretenses. For example, in the story of Narcissus, a mirror boundary undermines a case of self-identity and is tied to the punishment of Echo, whose desire is restricted to repeating the last word of the other (anacoluthon). An even more compact formulation can be found in the Homeric story of Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops. Here, entrapment, the use of the name — particularly as an anacoluthon, where the last ‘word’ radically revises the meaning of preceding actions — and the theme of the ‘nobody’ comes in a single informative package. It is not for nothing that the Cyclops has (precociously) the fabled single eye of perspectival representation. As the enthymeme of the audience predicts, the central gap, the place of the nobody, is also crucially the place of the name; and the name is the key to a critical crossing or escape.

The Homeric tribe of Cyclopes was known for their lack of hospitality. Their name is the anthropological adjective for societies who, living in isolation, treated strangers as enemies or food and followed only the severe laws of their gods of the hearth. Odysseus wished to find out if the Cyclops Polyphemus could be persuaded to offer the Greeks the traditional host’s gifts. Polyphemus refuted this thesis by imprisoning the Greeks inside his labyrinthine cave so that he might devour them at his leisure. The episode is structured by the witty tricks Odysseus employed to escape this cave prison. First, Odysseus blinded the one-eyed giant — effective only because the Cyclops had only one eye. Second, Odysseus presciently gave the Cyclops a fake name, telling him never to forget that ‘Nohbdy’ had blinded him. The literal-minded Cyclops accepted this
pronoun as a ‘particular’ proper name (antonomasia), but his later use of it would be heard as a pronoun by his Cyclopean neighbors. This puts the Cyclops in the position of the audience, whose alternation between universal (consumer of artwork) and particular (element inside the work of art) is effaced in the suspension of disbelief. Whereas the audience voluntarily takes on this ignorance on behalf of the possible experience of art, the Cyclops is, involuntarily, ignorant of the difference.

The third trick was a parody of hypotaxis, or subordination. The Cyclops counted his sheep by touch carefully as they were released each day to pasture, but the Greeks hung beneath the sheep. The sheep-men subverted the ‘transitive order’ of the cave by creating an ‘monstrous’ double the Cyclops could not detect.

‘Topography’ here involves not just the cave’s transitive space in contrast to an ‘intransitive’ escape but the common logic behind the tricks that form a tight sequence, a necessary order. Is there a connection linking these tricks and their common structure to travel space? The key lies in the ‘internal mirror effect’ provided by the enthymeme. The tricks were initiated with the shift from a visual to a tactile (stereognostic) basis, the blinding of the Cyclops. As a thoroughgoing literalist, the Cyclops had only one ‘track’ (= hearth or ‘eye’), just as his cave had only one entrance and channel. The Cyclops’ monologic was vulnerable to the sophistication of hypotaxis (subordination) in contrast to parataxis (one thing after another — the line of sheep). The ‘middle term’ of concealment, the antonomasia of ‘Nohbdy’ finished the game. The meaning of ‘Nohbdy’ as a pronoun ‘lay beneath’ its use as a proper name, and so the antonomasia was ‘silent’ to the single-minded giant.

Odysseus shows the way for the audience, which is, like paper or pixels, always both itself and not itself, a ‘Nohbdy’. The body sitting in the hard auditorium seat, coughing or staying quiet must also be no-body, the correspondent soul transported into the fictional truth of the work of art. This quick and dirty solution to the famous ‘mind-body problem’ is actually something of a philosophical
oddity, the formula of self-reference, a circular motion whereby the signifier, like Zeno’s Achilles chasing the tortoise, never quite catches up with the signified, not because it’s not faster and more mobile, easy to fold like the perfect representation, but because its time is of a different order, unable to synch up with the time of the represented, like a sound track that’s a millisecond slower or faster than the moving lips of the characters in a cinema — an ‘artifact’ that reminds us that we’re watching something artificial, imperfect, second-hand. For the drawing, this means that dialectic and time, not projective geometry, are generative and fundamental.

Topology and the Logic of Self-Reference

Self-reference is easier to swallow when it’s not an accident of production but something purposefully set to the service of rhetoric. This is when it becomes the basis of a joke, and hence the won-over affection of the audience, or the subject of ridicule, when the audience gets a good laugh at the expense of the speaker, accidentally or on purpose (cf. the political rally in Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* or the auction scene in *North by Northwest*).

The audience as enthymemic body-soul is, using another Lacanian reference, between two deaths. The first one is their own — separation of the soul from the body in the usual sense; the disembodiment initiated by imagination. The second is the ‘death’ brought about by the end of the artistic illusion, when characters either die or get married, if one follows the traditional formulas of tragedy and comedy. ‘Between-the-two-deaths’ is of course an anthropological stand-by: the interval of mourning set equal to the imagined journey of the soul in the underworld. Detached from funeral practice, it is the *katabasis*, the journey of the hero (originally meaning simply ‘a dead person’) in the same underworld, figured as a labyrinth, on a quest of retrieval (*Alcestis*, *Eurydice*). In the everyday world there is a simpler ‘explanation’: the escape of the subject by means of fantasy projection. Overwhelmed by the demands of the ‘networks of symbolic relationships’ — the
real meaning of ‘symbolic castration’, not a symbolization of castration but a castration by symbols — the subject must ‘de-realize’ him/herself by entering into the a-symbolic realm of the Real.

How can fantasy projection, nothing less than the locus of art, be a-symbolic? There are various answers to this question: the ‘demark’ of Deleuze, the MacGuffin and nobodies of Hitchcock, the antonomasiacs of Homer and other ancient authors. When ‘nobody’s home’, the puzzle, paradox, and paranormal take over. Every road’s a Möbius band, we know everything without knowing anything. Without a map, topology rules: we know the world through the left-right touch of the body (stereognosis) and we know the body through the a-logic of what Slavoj Žižek would call ‘organs without bodies’, or ‘desire’ liberated from the consensus of the corp-oration.

Endnotes

