

cathexis, fetish, and sinthome

The fetish and sinthome are standard component parts of Freudian–Lacanian theory, but as Slavoj Žižek has written, the two come very close to being two sides of the same coin.¹ How? Isn't the fetish a conscious construct, an arrangement of things with a psychic "investment" that Freud called *Besetzung*, translated by Ernest Jones into the more mysterious Greek word, cathexis (κάθεξις)? And, isn't the sinthome (Lacan's more ancient word, preferred over the modern "symptom") something that appears from out of the unconscious, because of a suppression?

Both fetish and sinthome involve a symmetry that could be described as "cross-inscription," which is already encountered in Ernst Jentsch's formulation of the two primary positions of the uncanny.² With the living person who is drawn to a fated end and the dead person who has "forgotten how to die," we have a crossing of life and death into *two scales of the object*, one scale visible from a distant point of view, the other which becomes visible suddenly when the point of view comes closer. "From a distance" a living person looks normal but on closer inspection we see that there is a "sinthomatic" behavior that uses free will to narrow choices towards a fixed and fatal end. In the complementary condition, what Lacan called "between the two deaths," we have what appears to be "simple death" but "not-all" of the deceased has died. There is a remainder, which is entirely in the register of the Symbolic. This is why all cultures prescribe a period of mourning to allow the Symbolic to "catch up to" the Real, *via* the Imaginary's construction of a soul wandering in Hades until it finds a rest after trials and judgments.

Note that the "death" inscribed at the kernel of the living and the "life" inscribed at the kernel of the dead is a matter of scale. We don't see it from a casual, detached distance. It is only something that appears when we examine details close up. It is the approach of the point of view to some central point that brings out the "cathexis" (investments) that modify the normative view we saw from a distance. The "short view" encounter with this detail forces us to retroactively revise our idea of what we had seen in the "long view." Consider the famous boom-shots used by Alfred Hitchcock to engineer the anxiety of the audience. In the 1946 film *Notorious*, for example, the camera stationed on the entry-hall balcony of the Nazi-spy Sebastian's mansion outside Rio di Janeiro glides over the balustrade and smoothly approaches Alicia's clinched left hand. This trajectory recalls the effortless glide past the iron gate across the road leading to Manderlay in his earlier film, *Rebecca*. Dreams of flying involve the "extimacy" of air enclosed by the dreamer, who inverts herself into a body enclosed and suspended by air. Similarly, this approach involving a transition from the long view to the short view — the movement from the "normative frame" to the "fetish-sinthome frame" — involves an extimacy that sees the small detail as radically inconsistent with the whole in which it fits.

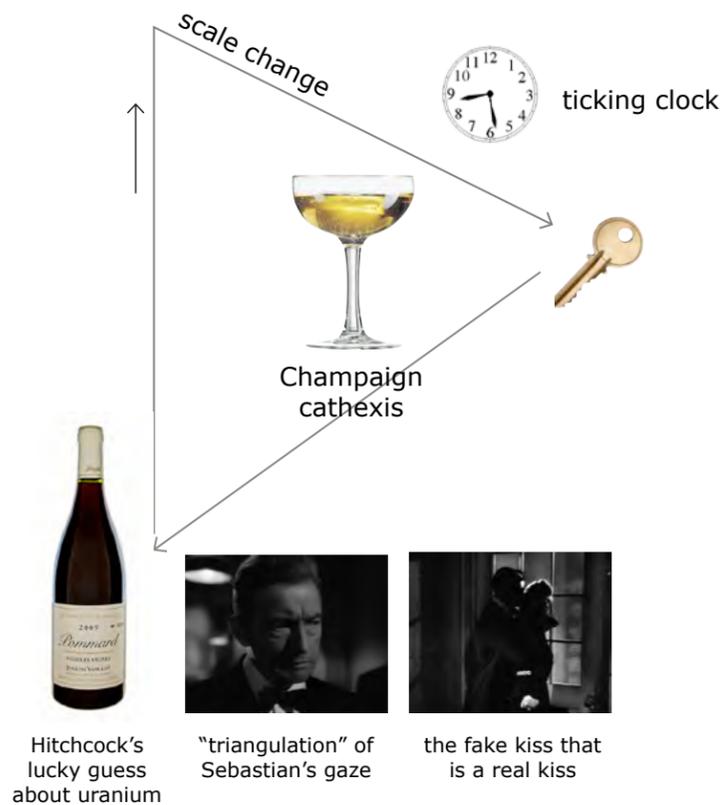
¹Slavoj Žižek, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism," *Cabinet 2*, Mapping Conversations (Spring 2001). Accessed 11/28/2013, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/western.php>.

²Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen." *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8, 22 (August 26, 1906): 195–98; and 8, 23 (September 1, 1906): 203–05.

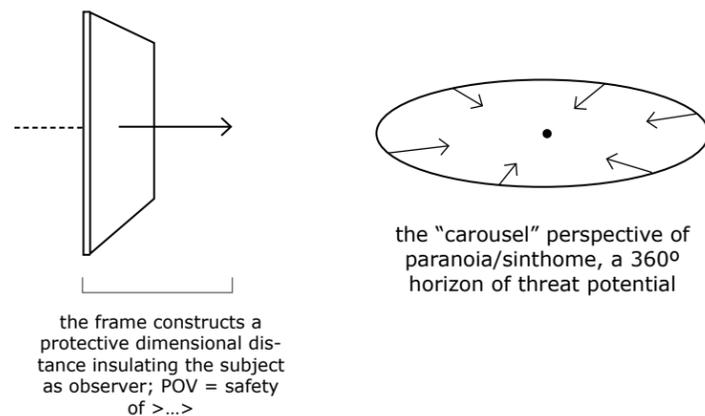
L This matter of the smooth approach of the POV would not be important were it not for this relation to fantasy, which on account of its kinship with the dream, employs a logic of the *coincidentia oppositorum* while nonetheless imposing a "smooth passage rule" on its movement from the long view to the short view. Is there any difference between fetish and sinthome? Doesn't the fetish always involves a conscious distribution of interest/*Besetzung* that allows the fetishist to know exactly how the psychic investments have made certain objects uniquely valuable to him/her? And, doesn't the sinthome always imply a communication from the unconscious, the place where some truth has been exiled? If we substitute "living" for conscious and "dead" for the unconscious, we solve the problem. Jentsch's A_D and D_A formula converts (1) to the fetish as A_D , where the unconscious is "enclosed" within the fetish to allow life, 'A', to proceed in a more-or-less normal fashion; and (2) to the sinthome as D_A , the Freudian Thing that has a life of its own, a "partial object" that, once separated from the contexts and other objects that support it with normative meanings, continues to radiate a kind of agalma — a value that is enigmatic in that it seems to desire something of the subject. When the POV approaches A_D , the fetish reveals an opposite quality. The palace turns out to be filthy; the priest turns out to be a pedophile; the vacation rental is infested with roaches. In contrast, when the POV approaches D_A , horror comes from the unexpected vitality of the dead Thing. The corpse in the coffin suddenly opens its eyes or lifts its finger. What should have been dead is not; it has "forgotten that it is dead."

“The symmetry between the fetish and the sinthome amount to a cross-inscription of life and death — realized in popular culture through breakdowns in the buffer zone created by the fetish. Once the frame of the fetish reverses, a space is opened for demonic contamination. The logic of metalepsis takes over when the “distant echo” becomes “all too close.”

2 Such is the case when the anxiety over the key in *Notorious* is transferred to the supply of Champaign. If the wine runs out, Sebastian must send the butler to the cellar for more, and then he will notice that Alicia and Devlin have taken his key so that they will have the chance to inspect the cellar's contraband. Alicia's opening hand at the end of the long boom shot reveals a fetish object, but the glasses of Champaign that the guests are rapidly consuming are pure sinthome — it "had not occurred" to Alicia that the Champaign might run out, so now every glass drunk is a tick of the clock that counts down to Sebastian's discovery. To discover the key, our frame floated like a dreamer dreaming of flying. The boom shot defied gravity to focus on the D of the A. When the temporal anxiety of the rapid depletion of Champaign is played out, the sinthomatic logic is filmed in a series of fast cuts. Metonymy selects out hands, glasses, trays — all the details of consumption, in jagged collage of the rapidly accelerating clicks of an imaginary count-down stopwatch.



3 How is it that we can glide into the fetish of the living person while we must experience the sinthome as if we were sitting on a horse of a carousel, the world spinning around us? The most obvious answer would be that in the first case we use the frame to construct a picture-like normal view in the distance; in the second we are inside the view looking out, turned this way and that, controlled by events that pop up anywhere on a 360° screen that affords us no escape! Rather than contrast these obviously different POVs, however, I would like to show that they are really the two sides of the same coin that Žižek wants to find in the case of the sinthome and fetish.

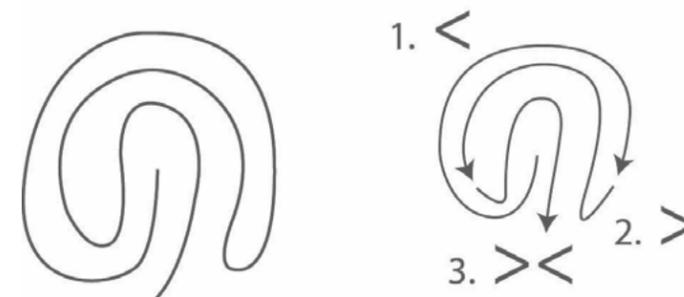


$$F \diamond S \rightarrow F \langle \rangle S \rightarrow F \langle \dots \rangle S \rightarrow F \langle \dots \rangle \langle \dots \rangle S$$

As $F \diamond S$, the fetish is realized as a fantasy of the sinthome; the scale dysfunction implied by reversed predication of $\langle \rangle$ means that fetish and sinthome are alternatively functions of each other, but that this alternation may be visible in spatializations; finally, as framing elements, a causal chain is opened up by the single frame, of which F and S are stereo pairs.

4 Metalepsis maps a condition of opposed pairs, such as fetish (F) and sinthome (S); these are opposed by virtue of their relation to the unconscious. The fetishist is "conscious" of the OCD-like conscription of objects invested with interest, while the subject suffering sinthomes doesn't know where they come from (like Alicia, who has forgotten about the Champaign). But, metalepsis requires that $F \diamond S$, that the fetish has an "imaginary/fantastic" relation to the sinthome, and to discover this we use the scale aspect of Lacan's *poisson*, $F \langle \rangle S$ — which suggests that extimacy will be involved — to expand a series of predications, a "causal chain": $F \langle \dots \rangle S$. The interior of the frame $\langle \rangle$ is, from the point of view of the fetish, the "normal scene." When F is inscribed into this interior, it will move along a smooth track, akin to the flight of the dreamer. However, when S moves into the interior, it sees things from the inside out. Its trajectory is not defined by the dream-Imaginary boom shot idea but, rather, the *Ché vuoi?* demands of the Symbolic, which "put the subject on the spot" — literally!

5 The demands of the Symbolic are precisely what perplex the journey of the soul of the undead, D_A , in its progress from literal death to Symbolic death. The classic emblem of this journey, the Thesian labyrinth, create a "thrice-great" or "thrice-perplex," rather, fractal space where inside and outside are maximally exchangeable. This is the *Ché vuoi?* put into geometric terms of Mandelbrot's set equation: $z_{n+1} = z_1^2 + c$, where the recursion of z "into itself" generates, among other things, a cube tending toward infinite surface area but zero volume — a mathematically precise description of Pascal's formula for God as an "infinite sphere" with circumference nowhere and center everywhere! The Symbolic is, of course, nothing more than the *Ché vuoi?* demand, the reversal of demand that comes with the phallic drive's demand on the (m)Other that is met with a reversal (the mother desires another): $\langle \rangle$ becomes $\langle \dots \rangle$ as the (m)Other's desire turns around.

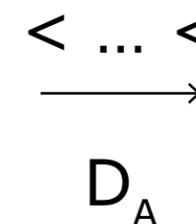


$$z_{n+1} = z_1^2 + c$$



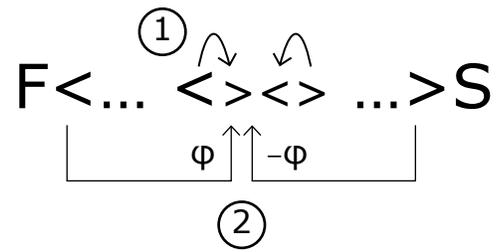
With recursion, direction is destabilized (ambiguated), also the inequality of response is made indeterminate and directionally uncertain.

6 So, how does $\langle \rangle$ become $\langle \dots \rangle$ in the case of the Imaginary? How does the POV "glide along effortlessly" from \rangle to \rangle ? The first answer is that, because the fetish is fully conscious of itself, at least in theory, the POV itself must take up the position of the unconscious: the dreamer or the dead. In this case there is not the aleination-anxiety of being on the spot but the separation anxiety of being rather than just watching the dead. It is the viewer who has "forgotten how to die," whose motion is suspended in air, who is able to imagine an Other who is anxious. This is the European who has assumed the luxury/privilege of multi-culturalism, whose glide is materialized by an overnight flight from Brussels to Lhasa, extended on the ground by guided tours and Disney-like constructions of idealized Buddhist society. The $\langle \dots \rangle$ creates a buffer where the "dead who has forgotten to die" lives in between the scene and the hotel room. Smoothness and floating are the uncontested standards of quality: "I hope your flight was smooth!" the concierge says as she opens the door to the well-furnished hotel lobby. "Did you have a good night's sleep?" the breakfast waiter asks. The equipage of the tourist stay, from mattresses to working elevators, carry out the demand of smoothness — this is how you know you are dead.



7 Thanks to the unconscious of the $\langle \dots \rangle$, the framed interior can take on the function of the fetish arrangement, a cathexis of investments that need not be true as long as they work within the economy of the death dream. Dreams, Freud advised, are dreamed precisely to extend sleep, by allowing the dreamer to not wake up. They are the unconscious's sometimes "last ditch effort" to avoid discovery, that the dream is not life. In this regard, the dream is like the transference love of the analysand who, on the point of a cure, falls in love with the analyst to avoid termination of treatment. The "on-the-spot" position of the victim of sinthomes can be understood when the smooth itinerary of travel breaks down. Scenes fragment. Demands come out of nowhere. One's head is set to spinning. Instead of wishing to prolong the (fetishistic) "dream," the sinthomatic victim wants to wake up from the nightmare. All too aware of the circularity ("fate") of the causal structure — its interpellation by some *dæmon* acting from an unpredictable hiding place on the horizon — the aim is to find "somewhere to hide." The fetishist is on the outside looking in, the sinthomatic subject is on the inside looking for some escape.

8 Travel experience tells us that the fetishist's insulated POV can easily break down, converting $>...>$ to $><$ in a matter of the seconds it takes for the elevator to break, the air-conditioner to fail, the hotel to lose one's reservations, the sudden appearance of a guerilla check-point on the road. This is metalepsis's "extimacy feature," the conversion of F and S to a ϕ and $-\phi$ form. Using the ϕ as "fantasy," we know which is which. The positive ϕ is the "dream," which wishes to extend itself; the negative form, $-\phi$, is the immediate desire to terminate, to escape. This is the long arrow of fantasy-desire versus the short arrow of desire of the Other turned into demand, the *Ché vuoi?* When F and S enter into the interior of the causal chain, $<...>$, they do so as a couple, a pair: $\phi/-\phi$. This is the quickly reversing logic of the fractal container of D_A . The fetish has allowed A_D to glide, to extend, to continue along a smooth path. The sinthome has imposed a geometry of the Real that can no longer be ignored. The rapid change between ϕ and $-\phi$ creates a "square wave," i.e. an "anamorph," whose POV is radically destabilized — whose POV in fact has been "lost" and needs to be "found"!



The opening for demonic intrusion comes with the reversal of the frame that insulates the viewer from the viewed in the "glide space" imagined as a boom shot by Hitchcock in *Notorious*. At the same time, D_A switches to A_D , the fetish switches to sinthome and the unconscious takes on the job of insulating the subject from the over-presence of the Real.

9 Now we can see how the Fetish and Sinthome cross-inscribe each other: F_S and S_F . Because F is a point of view that glides along in a "long view" perspective until it encounters an S, a sinthome which it attributes to the Other, it can maintain itself by controlling factors of distance and timing. The frame constitutes a buffer, a protective margin. Collapse of the long view to the short view bumps up against the Real and attempts to convert it into an opposite — the beautiful woman turns out to have an ugly feature, the perfect town has an ugly slum. From the Sinthome's point of view, which is really the lack or loss of any perspective required for a proper point of view, the screen is a horizon concealing potential dæmonic-metonymic surprise elements that may attack at any moment. This is the "crisis management mode" of subjectivity, where S is in the center of a circular threat-zone and F is waiting at the edge to attack at any moment. True to the logic of extimacy, however, the Sinthome subject discovers that what is on the periphery is also in the dead center; that the lack of any insulating distance or perspective is also the presence of a "traitor in our midst." Paranoia is the modality of the sinthomatic subject, while the death-drive compulsion to repeat (clearly manifest in the cathexis of fetishes of OCD sufferers) is what extends the glide to the scene of cathexis — idealized in the "World Heritage Sites" where European fantasies about the "old world" and "other cultures" are carefully arranged to maximize tourist potential.

Metalepsis offers a critical final insight. If Sinthome and Fetish are "reverse predicates" of each other, as the double-inscription of each suggests, it is the gap that finally owes the pair their ultimate disease-logic, their "etiology" so to speak. The gap as $><$ is in this sense "Lucretian." It requires us to imagine the normative state of things as the parallel motion of players and settings, where apparent motion is relative to frames which are also in motion. On this basis, the $><$ is simultaneously a center, a paranoid Panopticon within a 360° array of potential threats; and a periphery, a delusion or spell that resists being awakened, or, when awakened, constructs a backwards-running narrative as Pavel Florensky, citing Alfred Maury, noted about dreams that "begin where they end." This awakening is also a $><$, the topsy-turvy version of the fantasy, $<>$, which is both scaler (affording a point of view with long and short ranges) and a fantasy, \diamond , that protects itself from conversion to (Symbolic) reality but also buffers against the Real.

10 It is this last combination of functions that shows how fantasy employs the Imaginary, for the good reason that the Imaginary is, if anything, the framed view, $<...>$. The Symbolic occupies the interior as a chain of causes, but built into this chain is the capacity for conversion, $><$, which is implicit but imagined to come from outside, a disguise of the framing elements, F and S, as $\phi/-\phi$ — a Jekyll/Hyde construct. If, as we have seen, the Fetish and Sinthome are two sides of the same coin, the coin itself is the unconscious; and the two sides — which we can map with metalepsis — are proof of its existence as "a voice and nothing more" — a gap in the middle of two twins, one living, one dead.

