

## The Unconscious of Place

What is the “unconscious” of the places we inhabit as human, in the human world we construct through experience and in the imagination? This question is just as complicated, if not more so, than the general question of what the unconscious is in the first place. It is not a container; not a shadow; not an evil twin or small angel sitting on our shoulder to whisper in our ear. We have no direct access to it. Freud tried to analyze dreams, only to find that they, too, were organized like a language. Lacan recommended listening for the slips of tongue, the odd expressions, the repetition of certain names or phrases. His deductions came down to a series of extrapolations hoping to deduce a geography of a place that was by its very nature not a place.

In the case of the unconscious, however, failure is not the end of things; it is a clue, a key. Although the unconscious is not a container, it is in many respects like an imagined visit to an empty house or abandoned garden. It’s not an evil or good twin, but aspects of twinship, or any case of the double, seems to resonate with some possible analogies. When psychoanalysis looks for slips of the tongue, inconsistencies, irrational behavior, it’s using a rule we know for certain: that the unconscious never appears in public without a disguise, and that disguise is most often the negative in some form.

The point of course is not to expose the unconscious “for what it is.” As the negatives should tell us, it’s not anything: no content, no objects, no hidden treasures. The evidence points to the issue of the negative itself, and the complex boundary that forbids us entry to what seems like a territory of the unconscious. Like the boundary between life and death, it is not a

line drawn between two equal entities. Rather, it’s a line with a middle in it, a middle that takes us to an unexpected location, a kind of act of “extreme rendition” practiced by the CIA in the Cheney years.

Instead of crossing it, we go into the line itself, along the surface, the steep slope of boundary-ness. How is it possible for a place to completely become a boundary? The answer is not only it is possible, but we have lots of examples. The first is the most famous of all, the Cretan labyrinth designed, according to the fable, by Dædalus. Although it’s a meander rather than a maze — that is, there is no problem of choosing a left or right turn, since there are no turns — we still experience doubt when the passage turns in on itself, sometimes seeming to go outward, then tightening up to more cramped quarters. Our doubt is condensed into one problem. If we stop, we find that we can’t distinguish between going in and going out. It is the ultimate uncanny experience, getting outside or going inside no longer are any different.

Our only certain knowledge about the unconscious is that it deals with contingency — that is to say, it handles the Real as it comes. It doesn’t lose any bits and pieces. It assigns no hierarchical value. It doesn’t overlook irrelevant details. It’s a perfect recorder, in neurological terms. Things that happened when we were 2 months old are there; friends and family who die are still alive there; traumas don’t lose their intensity; even dreams are kept, like stacks of old DVDs or VCR tapes. This doesn’t mean we have any access; we don’t, at least not like a library where we can go in and check out a book. It’s a library that’s closed to the public but continues to send out late fee notices.

If the unconscious would just shut up, we might be happier, but we would no longer be human. Our identities as subjects would be destroyed. Our unconscious is who we are, written in a negative languages of lost objects, missed opportunities, things that did not as well as did happen, choices we made as well as the choices we didn't make. It's the contingent — chance — and everything associated with chance.

We can guess at the nature of the unconscious, but we don't have to. It's in constant communication with us, albeit in negative ways that refuse to be assimilated symbolically or through images. The unconscious "can't be reached" but it's also true to say that it "can't be escaped." It's a built-in component, the glue that holds together the other two realms of our humanity, the imaginary and the symbolic. It's the black matter, the Real, and it's no accident that the ancients called melancholy, or black bile, the humor that trumped the other three humors in its ability to penetrate into the heart of things.

### **Vertigo**

So, can architecture have an unconscious? Architecture is not missing a contingent component. It's just that, being contingent, it can't entirely anticipate it. Buildings are designed to withstand earthquakes; they're also designed to control crowds and, in some cases, serve military uses. But, there's no real predicting earthquakes or other natural disasters. Crowds do crazy things; and military actions are never certain. Weathering gradually erodes buildings, and coupled with obsolescence of use, style, or technology buildings end up as ruins, either the long drawn out ones that attract tourists or the ruins that last for 30 seconds, after the explosives have been discharged.

Buildings *come down*, so the vertical dimension is the one that takes us from the flat plans, elevations, and sections to the three-dimensional "real thing," but of course it's not a Real thing

quite yet. It's an imaginary thing, even when we're standing in front or inside of it. We see photos of the finished product, we imagine and even dream about it. But, the building is not real until it opens its doors to the contingency of actual use, light and shadow, the seasons, the natural disasters that will inevitably strike it, the terrorists who fly airplanes into it, or the contractors who got the demolition job.

When all of the contingencies are added up, they all amount to some version of a falling action, complementing the original erection that took the building from the drawings and models to the "real thing." Vitruvius had, amazingly, reflected on these three forms of architectural reality. Vitruvius named the three kinds of drawings — plans, elevations, and perspectives — as *ichnography*, *orthography*, and *scenography*; but the use of these drawings allows us to consider all drawings as the symbolic first step of design, when the buildings is conceived on a flat surface, the drawing. "*Ichnography*," this drawing phase, is followed by the construction of buildings that erect the plans and elevations to full three-dimensional forms: "*orthography*." This is related to the erection of the building from the flat site; also to the extension of the building's foundations below the ground line — an important consideration in ancient times, when this underground had to be protected, ritually, from curses and spiritual contaminations.

"*Sciagraphy*," or shadow-casting, had to do with the perspective drawings that predicted what the building would look like in context, but also the real-world exposure of the building to contingent events of nature and history. The perspective drawing was able to relate the building to the horizon and to the eclipsing effects of nearby buildings and landforms. And, because casting shadows and shading the forms according to the daily and seasonal changes of light, perspective could anticipate the building as fac-

ing its own death at the hand of time. In perspective, the building was put in relationship to a vanishing point and a point of view — a “field of the visible” that, like a theatrical stage, asks the building to assume a part in a play whose ending is not known. Thus, it was not inappropriate or mysterious for Sabastiano Serlio to depict an architecture of comedy and one of tragedy. Tragedies in classical times were about famous figures, *named* persons, and the logic was that what goes up (i.e. becomes famous) must come down. Architecture as such was reserved for these risk-taking occupants; buildings were for those “without names,” the commoners. The master is one who, in Hegel’s terms, is willing to risk his life for his name. This mortality is the essence of architecture, since risk and the life of a building combine contingency with the vital essence. Architecture *is* this combination.

Architecture erects itself from *symbolic* drawing to *imaginary* presence, and thence to *Real* contingencies of use, habitation, weathering, disasters, i.e. the collective effects of time. We can’t avoid saying that this final destination, as Real and Real can be, is nonetheless architecture’s unconscious. It is the unimaginable (= unpredictable as well as something that will destroy the image/imaginary) component that is associated with elevation, and the dimension of the vertical condenses and compresses the significance of this unconscious.

What are we to make of Hitchcock’s repeated motif of the hand holding someone suspended in space? In *Young and Innocent* (1937), the wrongly accused fugitive Tisdale grabs Erica’s hand just in time to keep her from disappearing down an old mine shaft.<sup>1</sup> In *Saboteur* (1942) the motif makes its second appearance on the heights of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>2</sup> The famous scene in *North by Northwest* (1959) has Cary Grant giving Eva Marie Saint a lift up on two occasions, once on Rushmore, another in a Pullman bunk. But, even Thorwald’s push to

loosen Jefferies’ grip on the windowsill in *Rear Window* (1954) might count as a negative instance. *To Catch a Thief* (1955) also deals with roof-top chases and an outstretched hand. The hand works positively for rescue in *Young and Innocent* and *North by Northwest*; negatively in *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*. In *Vertigo*, it could actually be Scotty who fell, since we are mysteriously in the dark about how he survived the wait for help to arrive while hanging to the precarious gutter; this concealed metonymy (the reason for his fear of heights) is conjoined with the final metonymy of Judy falling “for a second time,” as the “real” “fake” who had impersonated Madeleine.

The person suspended from another’s hand is in the position to enact the return to death along the dimension associated with the building’s erection. This motif in some way personalizes the failure and contingency of architecture’s unconscious. In the dramatic terms of the films in which it happens, how does it function? In other words, is it not also the *element of the unconscious* that haunts the plot? In *Rear Window*, we accept the explanation of Jefferies’ broken leg: he has been injured during one of his assignments. Possibly, we see the last photograph he took before being hit by a loose wheel at an auto race. Is this not also a pun? Isn’t Jefferies a “loose wheel” among the residents of his urban residential courtyard? Isn’t Scotty’s guilt over his fellow officer’s death a case of having “let him down”? These expressions, metonymies derived from clichés, are accidentally paired with their literal conditions. Just as Erica “gives Tisdale a lift” in the first part of *Young and Innocent*, Tisdale returns the favor by lifting her out of a collapsing mine shaft. In each case, a metonymy “coincidentally comes true” when it is paired with a literal case later on. The first metonymy acts as an unwitting and/or unrecognized omen, like the half of a *tessera* broken at parting to be reunited later with its missing half.

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1. This is a clever echo of the first metonymy, where Erica gave Tisdale a lift "just in time" to save him from being captured by the police.
  2. Slavoj Žižek, in citing this Hitchcockian "sinthom," has missed the case of *Young and Innocent* and cites *Saboteur* as the first instance.