

Center Everywhere, Periphery Nowhere: A Screen Theory of Architecture

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Architecture theory is formed mostly by the contingent historical conditions that surround architecture and theory-making itself, but three theme-areas that deal predominantly with the role of the image have managed to span histories, cultures, and ideologies: (1) the interest in popular culture, introduced most notably by Rudofsky, Banham, and Venturi; (2) semiotics/semiology, undertaken most distinctively by Broadbent, Preziosi, and Frascari; and (3) film theory, adopted to a variety of uses by a variety of theorists.¹ Although these three fields have suffered varied fates as at the hands of “post-theory,” their emphasis on the image has kept this issue central to architectural theorizing.

Looking back to trace the threads of discourse that would explain the image’s increasing centrality would require a survey of five-hundred years of intellectual history. Even the most recent “contributors” have their own complex stories: topology, phenomenology, critics of the Gaze, the psychology of Jacques Lacan. It is probably not possible to untangle these influences in order to see just what the shadow has been cast by the image, but it is possible to move away from ideas of image as a static artifact to a more dynamic model. I would suggest that we momentarily restrict our view to focus on the way *visibility involves invisibility* in our direct confrontations with specific appearances, representations, and even non-visual elements, such as sounds, tastes, and memories.

This intentionally moves away from such well known approaches as the “picture theory” of W. J. T. Mitchell.² We should not trap the “image” in the role of a picture. I suggest using the more inclusive metaphor of the “screen”—a dynamic topological account of the function of representation. This would consider everything (including pictures) as a screen or an element in relation to a screen—including theory itself. Where picture

theory looks at pictures, screen theory includes the viewer as well as the viewer’s habits, techniques, and ideas of authority. The question of vision’s directionality—not just *from “subject” to “object”* but from architecture back to the subject—is a central issue.³

As a construct, the screen combines materialism, the potential of anamorphosis, and the human habit of projecting beyond what is present to what is wished or feared. The screen approach aims to avoid the popular but misleading dichotomy between “image and thing,” between “subjective fantasy and objective factuality.” The implications for architecture theory, production, and experience are central. Thematization of “architecture as image” misses its main opportunities by seemingly creating a sub-species of experience that focuses on perception. It could be argued, however, that architecture *is* an image, a screen, in very primitive ways.⁴ And, whether or not the imagination plays a subsequent significant role, the screen is always present as an operative element. A theory of the image in architecture would depend on *screen* as the nexus of actions and perceptions at multiple levels, from historical and cultural to individual.

Another important point: “Screen theory” needs to be developed *diagrammatically*, leaving open the interpretation or specific meaning of the various component parts. A diagram can be precise without constraining application or interpretation. The point is not to construct a “theory of everything” which attempts to establish a unified field of presuppositions, but rather to develop a framework that enables the cross-comparison of a wide variety of examples from an equally wide variety of perspectives. Comparison, analogy, and systems of substitution are most useful, but they require a specific structural design to allow a free flow of topics

and strategies across various the boundaries separating media, cultures, and historical periods.

There are a few key ideas required to understand how the screen can serve as an "all-purpose" and generative concept for architecture, using the three main "methodological sources" cited in the beginning: (1) from semiotics, the idea of a "hinge" between metaphor and metonymy enabling new meanings to be generated from old parts; (2) from film criticism, the "suture" or "inside frame"; and (3) from popular culture theory, the idea that objects can be invested with extensive meaning through symbolic shifts in the "point of view." The aim of constructing any theoretical groundwork is to move away from polemical level, where issues of what is central and what is peripheral in terms of concern, pedagogy, and praxis dominate. A groundwork should be a template rather than a manifesto and, in this function, should rely on pragmatic utility.

THE SEMIOTIC HINGE

Culture begins when humans are able to see the continua of nature as a collective of discrete parts, each with a potentially independent function and existence. The color spectrum becomes a set of namable colors. Each language limits the wide variability of sound to a relatively small set of standard vocalizations. Important categories of experience, such as snow for the Eskimos or camels for nomads, are particularized to express character, use, and metaphoric relationships.⁵

Opposition creates an independent function capable of conveying abstract and invisible ideas. Light and dark, day and night, left and right come to stand for the most broadly cosmic and theological notions. One opposition of particular importance was made famous by Saussure: the "composite structure" of the sign, described famously as the opposition of signifier to signified (S/s).⁶ By stressing the *arbitrariness* by which different signifiers are culturally "chosen" to signify things that must be common to cultural groups (*tree, arbre, Baum*, etc.), Saussure was able to demonstrate the cooperative co-existence of two different *realms* of signification: a metonymic realm that allows for substitution, modification, and error; and a metaphoric realm that instates reality as a consistent and coherent whole. Metaphors, like pictures, have frames that focus on some elements while excluding others.

Metonymy, which participates in the structuring of every metaphor and can sometimes be a metaphor itself, creates "chains of signification" that stretch in various directions (Fig. 1). The screen uses both meta-

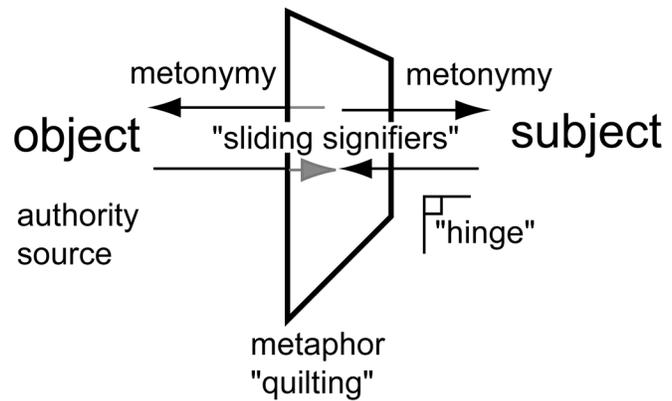


Fig. 1. The metaphorical screen stabilizes the (metonymical) sliding signifiers.

phor and metonymy to structure space and time around appearances, and this is where it becomes particularly useful in architecture criticism. Metonymy has to do with the materiality of the sign, its potential for multiple meanings, ambiguity, and the creation of new meaning.

The screen shows how appearances can operate at many levels at once. Projectively, the screen serves as a neutral medium of transmission—a window, canvas, or paper that is the material but passive connection between observer and observed. When metonymic materiality becomes a metaphor itself, the screen becomes a surface qualified by stains and marks that, eluding the normative system of symbolic relationships, relate the separate "surplus zones" belonging to the subject and object. Because these surpluses serve as caches of what cannot be symbolized, the screen's hinge quality demonstrates the nexus of "reality" and what might be called the "poetically Real." The screen mediates the shift in the point of view, often supported by some "anamorphic" device that guides our tangible movement between reality and the Real. In short, the screen is the model for all works of art in their polymorphous roles, structured by the self-reversing Gaze.

By diagramming the zones that are symbolically required by the screen, three kinds of opposition can related "topologically." Simple opposition of subject and object, with a neutral ('realistic') medium in between, is made more complex when surplus zones are identified. These cannot be directly represented and lie outside of what is used by cultures to bind their members through symbolic relationships such as laws, rules, and norms. What is this surplus? It is created and sustained by the imagination and by the conditions of the network of symbolic relationships. It is accessible

through an “anamorphic” flip or twist of the point of view that uses the metonymic properties of the screen in a metaphoric way, as if the tain of the mirror became a psychic medium rather than an obedient reflective mechanism. The second form of opposition, deriving from the semiotic opposition of *S/s*, signifier over signified, in some sense the opposition of metaphor and metonymy, is the driving force behind the production of these surplus zones. The “hinge-like” relationship identified by Saussure and developed by Lacan through the idea of “sliding signifiers” and process of “quilting” that temporarily stabilizes signification, is particularly helpful in relating the shift from reality to the Real as a symbolic shift in the point of view. The second form of opposition makes it possible to articulate the “a-symbolic” as the imaginative, anamorphic world of art.

The overall structure of the reality/Real involves an anamorphic flip in the point of view (Fig. 2). This requires a new form of opposition that connects, through a topology that “impossibly” connects the surplus of the subject with the surplus of the object. We cannot model this connection projectively, as a picture of relationships, but we can imagine it dynamically, as the reunion of a “space” originally split by the screen — a reunion that, like the broken pottery (*tessera*) used by Roman friends at parting, combines past and future in a way that works like a “key” validating the identity of two symmetrical events, parting and returning. The overall structure of this topology is best described by the Möbius strip, used frequently by Lacan to play out the contradictory self-referential “space” of the psyche.⁷

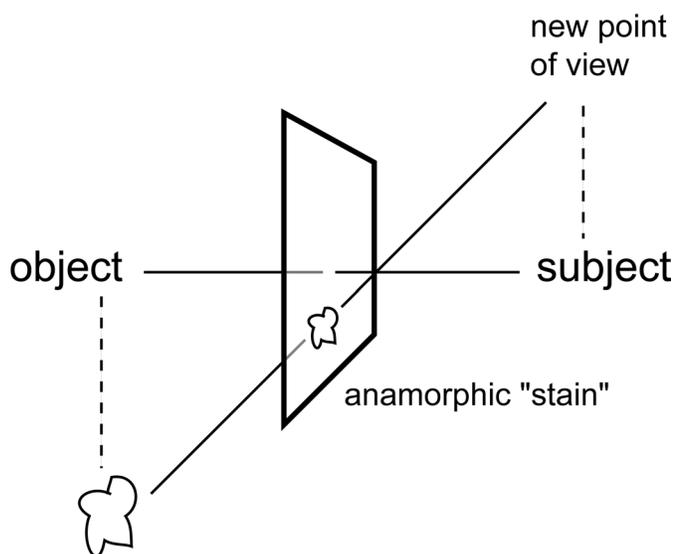


Fig. 2. Anamorphosis mediates the surpluses of the subject and the object.

The re-connection of the surplus zones is, in art, most often materialized through the imaginary subjects and objects that, real enough in the diagetive story-space of the art work, play out the topographical necessities in a plot that hinges on a twist of irony. Ordinary reality lacks story structure in that there are not absolute beginnings, middles, and ends. But, the fantastic core of all stories—four themes identified by Borges as the kernels of the imagination—condense and formalize this twist in ways that can be carried out in a variety of ways.⁸ The themes of the double, travel through time, the contamination of reality by the dream, and the story inside the story are “un-realistic” but thoroughly Real within the mandates of the topological psyche. The architectural counterparts of these literary themes are equally common and equally striking.

For the *double*, symmetry, semblance, and reference makes it possible to create places corresponding to Mircea Eliade’s “eternal return.” Every Roman camp and city, for example, was a cosmic center; and the idea that there were many of them did not detract from the efficacy of any one of them.

The theme of the *story within the story* is easily transposed into the architectural theme of concentricity, multiple containment. This can be done with a shift of scale as well. In Edward Albee’s play, *Tiny Alice*, a model of a castle sits on a table in the room of the real (?) castle, and inside the model is a table with a yet smaller model. Julian asks the butler (whose name is Butler) if there is a still smaller table with a still smaller model, but he declines to answer, saying that it would be “Hell to clean.”⁹

Cleaning Hell is in fact what the *contamination of reality by the dream*, the third theme of the fantastic, is all about, and when we’re in such purposefully contaminated settings as Disneyland or Las Vegas we forget that this “trick” occurs with every transaction made between the structure we call “reality” and the misprisions, dream versions, and partial views of the individuals who inhabit it. Contamination is the violation of the boundary that shows just how purposefully defective our psychic boundaries are, how much the solid line is made to be twisted by knots and tangles.

Travel through time, the fourth theme of the fantastic, involves ideas of weathering, ruin, and mortality that are contained by custom and nature in the materiality of all architecture. When detailing intentionally frames “the past” or “the passing of time” the direction of our attention is turned from forwards to backwards, or from “venatic” to “forensic,” to use terms borrowed from the hunt and the courtroom. Rose Macauley’s

famous meditation, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, connected this genre of architectural experience with the more general theme of the Grotesque—an ancient mode of art relating to the even more ancient theme of *katabasis*, the descent into the underworld, undertaken by the *hero* ('the dead') as a trial to discover truth or wealth buried at the core of the material earth. Every framing of the past involves a bit of this graveside magic, and a bit of the horror of finding our own corpse among the stones.

FILM THEORY: SUTURE, SUTURE EVERYWHERE

If any field of study might offer some explanation of these very common—and very significant—architectural situations, it is film theory's most famous borrowing from the psychology of Lacan: the idea of *suture*. Adapted to the structure of film narrative, the suture involves a group of techniques whereby the "outside" (the audience or the externality imagined by adapting a narrative point of view) is connected in a quick and often surprising fashion to the center of things. "Post-theorists," in throwing out Lacan, have also underestimated the suture's importance. A reinstatement is justified on a number of grounds.

Suture is best described as a sudden reversal of the "Cartesian" assumption that space and time are homogeneous, linear, and infinitely extended. Sailing around the world to encounter the Indies would have led Columbus to a suture event had he not encountered an intervening double. Finding a traitor in one's midst is a suture situation; the feared outside, against which every precaution has been taken, turns out to be interior. Edgar Allan Poe used this idea in "The Masque of the Red Death," where the plague strikes inside the castle used to seal it out.

Suture dramatizes the psyche's opposition of reality to the Real. It also demonstrates how commonly and unthinkingly we violate the rules of reality, the symbolic network of relationships, to get at the surplus zones lying beyond representation. What is striking about suture is that it is a thoroughly architectural idea. The simplest and most public example would be Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. A literally chiasmic structure guides the audience to the point where the reflections, at first aligned with the representational function of the memorial, take on a life of their own as spectral ghosts standing behind their names. In a technique borrowed from the Dylan Thomas poem/play, "Under Milk Wood," where the dead of a cemetery come out to tell their story, the past finds a voice *from*

precisely the center of the externalized Other, thanks to the optics of mirrors.

Suture is also available through scale inversion, which makes small things work like large things and *vice versa*. Scarpa's openings and edges could be regarded as a textbook of suture. The inside-outside courtyards of Stirling work the same way, creating ocular interiors that curve buildings in on themselves, compounded by spiral circulation. The original of this kind of suture is the Cretan Labyrinth, an emblem of recursion. Looking at the pattern of turns, this model turns out to be a fractal—its ABA pattern is really A(aba)B(aba)A(aba). Such is Hell, all cleaned up.

There are other contributions of film theory that one might mention in relation to the reality/Real problem and the four fantastic topologies that address it. *Acousmatics*—the voice that cannot be located—is an ideal route to return architecture to issues of sound and voice. Without this connection, which originally had to do with the worship of household gods and structure of the hearth, spaces for hospitality, and the development of cuisine, the origins of architecture remains in shadowed obscurity. With it, the ancient and continuing relationship of architecture to rhetoric becomes evident.

Other themes and ideas lie in wait for proper and fruitful exploitation by architecture theory. Individual films—in particular the works of *auteurs* who repeat themes, structures, and techniques—point to the importance of the "sinthom," the Lacanian version of the symptom adapted for the purposes of art. The sinthom is not a thing, a technique, or a cluster of themes. It is, instead, an empty and indefinable center around which swirl elements whose only connection is the intense "black hole" of "compulsive" repetition. Such swirling is strongly in evidence in Aalto's work—and nowhere more clearly stated than in Villa Mairea. Contemporary theory's preference for projective relationships tying architecture to political and social issues has difficulty coming to terms with empty centers, non-meaning, and non-linear association of topics. The sinthom requires a "hopscotch" method of study that is able to change levels, genres, and media quickly but accountably.¹⁰ The main purpose of this diagrammatic approach to a topology of architecture is to find a template that acts not as a map but as a "rhythmic design" calibrating the "returns to the sinthom" that occur in so many different circumstances.

POPULAR CULTURE SEZ SO: SHIFTS IN THE POINT OF VIEW

The coexistence of architecture theory with theory in other fields—and even Post-Theory—relies on a formula of relevance centering on human use and signification. Theoretical questions cannot be partitioned for convenience or ideology without violating the basic rule of discourse—that the audience can always think whatever it likes. Acting like a form of populism, a *vox populi*, popular culture has, in a similar sense, always had the upper hand in architectural theory. The small fraction of the built world accomplished by professional architects, and the even small fraction of *that* work that engages theoretical issues in any intelligible way, shows just how feeble theory is in comparison to the material evidence of its subject. Most confrontations between theory and the built world have begun with a declaration of defeat. Rudofsky's revolutionary *Architecture without Architects* could have ended the matter, but *Learning from Las Vegas* responded to the need for precision. It was not enough to show that theory was irrelevant, it had to show how theory should suffer and reform.

Reyner Bahnam's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* emphasized desire and opportunism. The result was much like my own "diagrammatic description of a psychic topology" in that the topology was a real *topography* and the psyche was the real and collective psyche of successive waves of immigrants, who, like the *bricoleurs* they were, developed distinctive material landscapes out of "parts" laying at hand.

Popular culture has much to offer besides literal buildings and landscapes. There are photographs, paintings, and films that frame and encapsulate these solid worlds and alloy them to the architecture of the dream and the wish. There are the commercial transformations of the material world that know the metrics of desire better than most psychologists. There are the worlds of the tourist as well as the worlds of war, which we hope to avoid if at all possible. More: the world of hunger and the world of cuisine, the world of security and the world of fear.

The Metro-D.C. sniper exemplifies the power of these "subjective" popular transformations. Acting through the scope of a high-powered rifle, the sniper used the ultra-mobility of the suburban landscape to locate victims within an "anywhere" notable only for the mundane, "anywhere" quality of its sites: self-service gas pumps, restaurant parking lots, park benches, bus stops. No clearer example of the suture could be found. The outside was at every inside, the bullet for *one*

person passed through the collective, secure space of the m/any.

Does not this topology help us understand the intricacies of the sniper's identity? Was the prime suspect not an example of someone defined in the most literal way through a military "network of symbolic relationships"; someone who sought an imaginary helper in his project of desire, shooting from the darkened *poché* of the suburban landscape? If the evidence of popular culture—horrific or otherwise—is to have value for theory, the notion that topics must be projective, linear, and rationally associated (the "overlay" as opposed to the "palimpsest" approach) must be abandoned.

A topological, polymorphous, and at times perverse method of "hopscoching"—from one level to another, one theme to another, one medium to another—must be formalized around what we know to be true about human nature, human thought, and human history. The form of this humanistic knowledge is the *sinthom*, the symptom of the collective.¹¹ Contingency, the proper subject matter of the historical approach, must be aligned with the *necessity* woven in topological ways into the fabric of everyday life, which must include quotidian facticity but also—and just as naturally—the wild dreams of any and all.

"GOD IS A CIRCLE WHOSE CENTER IS EVERYWHERE . . ."

The popular authentication (and de-authentication) device, "center and periphery," has been used to define cities, cultures, ideas, disciplines, and political parties. One cannot help, however, attaching Borges' borrowing of a traditional conundrum—that God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.¹² If space is truly curved and closed, as Einstein argued, then the theological idea becomes an accurate description of the topology of the world of physics. Why do we continue to think in terms of the projective plane, the *line* of time, and the pure center protected from the hostile periphery? Why are there monsters on the margin as much today as in Herodotus's time? Screen theory argues that reality and the Real are composite consequences of our apprehension of appearances as intentional, as *meant to be seen*. The teleology of the visible world requires both chance and necessity, both symbol and non-symbol. The viewer-subject is not a simple entity either, but a compound of imaginary and literalistic parts.

The resulting topology defies projective conceptualization, which is to say "picture thinking," because it is

able to suture the visible to the invisible using a delay corresponding to art's "displacement" of the normal. The regions of this topology of particular interest to architecture—shadow, place-of-voice, *poché* and vents—vivify the "surplus regions" of the subject and object, just as the anamorphic potentialities of scale and detail make screen theory particularly apt for the progress of architectural production and experience.

NOTES

¹ Mark Lamster, ed., *Architecture and Film* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000).

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory, Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³ The reversibility of the gaze is the hallmark of Lacan's ideas about the screen and is what distinguishes Lacan's approach from Derrida's. Some Lacanian ideas have been incorporated into this theory of the screen, but in general my emphasis is on topology, architecture, and art. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 125-29.

⁴ The architectural importance of screens is suggested by the etymological associations of screen with tents, scenes, shadows, souls, and spying.

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought, The Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁶ Fernand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 156, 235.

⁸ James E. Irby, "Introduction," in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), p. xviii.

⁹ Edward Albee, *Tiny Alice* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 25.

¹⁰ "Hopscotch," Symposium held at Virginia Tech / Alexandria, Spring 2002.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan," in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright, eds., *The Žižek Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 11-36.

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal," *op. cit.*, pp. 189-92. Borges traced the antecedents of this phrase from Pascal to Giordano Bruno and, before him, Alain de Lille.