

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

WORKSHOP: CITIES IM-MEDIATED THROUGH METALEPSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Metalepsis, a figure of rhetoric, is essentially a management program for the space created within a double frame. What's this? Between the recognizable frame created by the conventions of media and an implicit but often unrecognized frame constructed by discourse and perception, there exists a gap, a "nowhere" whose ambiguous status invites the imagination to conceive of various kinds of completion. In architecture, cities, landscapes, and works of art of all kinds this space allows for the possibility of "sites of exception." The structure of these sites is remarkably constant across a wide range of media: it is a materialized void within which the imagination is able to operate under a condition of "unlimited semiosis."¹

This metalepsis workshop adapts Gérard Genette's contrasting functions of diegesis and mimesis to the psychoanalytic concept of cathexis ("investment").² Metalepsis shows how ideology and perception leave behind signatures in the spatial-temporal field. "Inventories" driven by fetish end in a collapse of ideological fantasies — a collapse that opens up theory to the immediacy of acts. Art in general and film in particular have been able to stylize this transition, and the workshop uses visual examples from painting (Velázquez, Magritte, Picasso) and film (*The Gleaners and I*, *Mulholland Drive*) to parse this break and play out its sequences of gaps and delays. Despite the intricacy of the theoretical implications, the results of this shift from ideology fetish (mediation) to act (im-mediacy) constitute the everyday reality of the city of popular culture. Metalepsis is recognizable in multiple commonplace but uncanny conditions. The workshop uses a shorthand notation based on standard uses of frames in art, literature, and film. The metalepsis workshop, in various forms, has been hosted by the University of Pennsylvania, Cleveland Urban Institute, Carleton University, Yale, LSU, NCSU, SUNY Buffalo, Washington–Alexandria Architecture Center, and, most recently, the ŽižekStudies Conference, Cincinnati.

INTRODUCTION

Of all McLuhan's original contributions to communications theory, technology discourse, and concepts of contemporary urban culture, the "binary signifier" of hot and cold stands as the most problematic. It was McLuhan's argument that "hot media" were those that required the audience to do little to consume the content. Movies were thus hot because everything was done on the screen, at high resolution within a narrow sensual range; little audience input was required.³ In contrast, television, which would seem to be a home version of the movies, was "cool" in McLuhan's terminology, because it required greater involvement in contextualizing. With a cool medium, the viewer actively determines meaning, and extra engagement is needed because the source's energy level is lower — correspondingly, the audience's input must be higher.

As a formal descriptive system, the thermodynamic metaphor pleased almost no one.⁴ For example, what is being hot or cold? — the medium itself, its form, or the demands it makes on the audience?

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

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The relation of “cool” to jazz failed to incorporate jazz’s own twist on the cool, epitomized by Miles Davis’s general detached demeanor as well as his famous album, *Birth of the Cool* (1957, Columbia Records). When be-bop evolved from “hot jazz” as a crucible to purify *leitmotifs* and perfect technical skills, cool and hot mixed like the ice cream and hot fruit of Bananas Foster. The stories of Minton’s Jazz Club sessions, where musicians would challenge each other to keep up to fast-paced glissando-crazed twists and turns, are famous. The cool of jazz’s cool reflects jazz’s own origins as “jas” or “jass,” i.e. “sex.” One could lose one’s self and be a “fool in love” or, with musical detachment, develop a form of control, presence, and readiness.

Although the binary system created confusion for many readers, McLuhan made it make sense contextually in *Understanding Media*. Its failure as a typology made for its success as a generator of ideas, comparisons, and critical considerations that made sense retroactively, despite the vagueness of the hot-cold idea. Those who have wanted to make the system fit, however, usually take up the notion of mediation. They claim that the terms are not so much opposites as poles. The important thing for this approach is to focus on the space in between as shades of gray, each term blending into the other. Consequently, extreme cases do not exist (despite McLuhan’s extensive topology of identifications). The search for mediated middle positions is a standard humanistic project, possibly deriving from Aristotle’s idea of the golden mean, a balance point that is simultaneously static and dynamic, able to include the contradictions implied by opposites. This could be generalized as the idea of “life as accommodation and compromise,” opposite the more Platonic idea of pure form, with its “impossible” and “inaccessible” purities.

FROM BINARY SIGNIFIER TO MATRIX

We argue that the conversion of McLuhan’s hot-cold binary into a system of gradations does not work; that, however confusing the definition of hot and cold as a thermodynamics of cultures’ reception of media, the difficulty itself leads to an option that promises more than the “shades of gray” approach. To describe this option and its significance for the dynamic of cities — cities that, in particular, embody cultures’ involvements with media — we must employ the idea of *metalepsis*: “the inclusion of framing elements within the contents of the frame”; but this is also, significantly, the body inside the body, the power of copulation, impregnation, gestation, birth — the *matrix*.

René Magritte’s famous painting, *Ceci n’est pas un pipe*, could possibly provide all that is needed to explain the frame as an epistemic device. The other side of *metalepsis* is the sexual-generative idea of the womb and place of origins. The vitality of the idea of the matrix was diluted as the word was quickly replaced in vernacular languages by other words (uterus, womb; *chora*, home, homeland).⁵ To be more precise, the *matrix* of the media polarity of hot and cold is a *mediatrix*, “the mother in-between,” a womb or pocket of excluded and exceptional meaning, a site of impossibility that combines with necessity, akin to James Joyce’s idea of epiphany.

Possibly, the *Ur*-example involves an equally religious origin: the Immaculate Conception of Christianity, the ultimate in sacred sexual events, but even here *metalepsis* alerts us to complications and nuances with broad implications. In one account Mary is impregnated through her ear; this is a metaphor for the word of God as a whispered love, a secret knowledge with generative power. Once “heard,” the word loses its strictly semantic-performative function within the chain of signifiers and takes on the ability to grow through a process of recursive self-definition. We use this concept to return the often abused term “autopoiesis” to its original sense. In the matrix, the womb of the virgin, conventional meaning dissociates, and the mediation it engages becomes *im*-mediate. There is nothing more intimate, more immediate than conception through the impregnation of sound — an “acousmatic” word. And, there is nothing to be said about this spectacular convergence of love, sexuality, and the body that does not involve the logic of *metalepsis*.

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

To serve as a guide in this extension of metalepsis to include visual/formal framing, sexual generation (and the function of the relevant organs), and the autopoiesis of the matrix as both maternal-sexual and spatial, we need to look at the case of the “pure antecedent”: terms that involve their opposite but, in so doing, also include a void, a gap in meaning, where the movement from one meaning to its opposite involves a small remainder. *Curiously*, such terms cluster around the function of sheltering. The host-guest complex is the most curious example. “Hostility” and “hospitality” stem from a single word (e.g. the Latin *hostes*) and possibly a single idea in many cultures. Running alongside is “host,” which is “ghost,” both taste (*gast*) and the laminar flow of spirit (*Geist*).

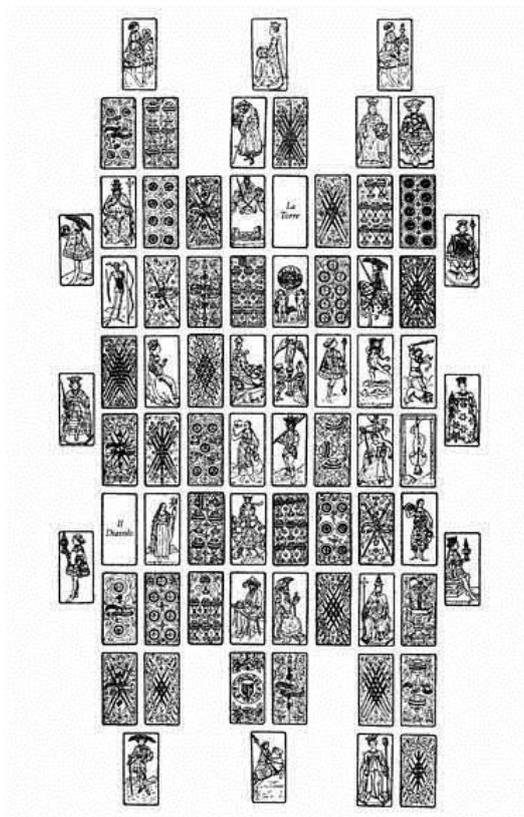


Figure 1. The Tarot “zairja” from Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*

The emblem of these metaleptic combinations could be the haunted house or castle, as in Italo Calvino’s *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, where guests are transfixed by a magic spell. The fact that “sacred” is itself metaleptic (as both something highly regarded as well as obscene) allows the host-guest complex to combine with the *Unheimlich*, famously analyzed by Sigmund Freud.⁶ Freud proclaimed in the beginning of his famous essay that “home” and the “uncanny” were, etymologically as well as in terms of cultural practices that involved them, identical. The implications were Hegelian: that within *identity itself* was this capability for self-conversion, self-negation. The home was automatically uncanny, but the uncanny was also something attractive, alluring, erotic: i.e. a matrix. That the concept of home automatically falls into the spooky potentiality of the un-home means that houses, cities, and possibly whole nations are versions of the grave, something put out of sight but permanent *as site*: a perpetual source for the voice and potential for return that only the dead can effect (*apophrades*).⁷

Paul Wheatley, in his examination of the seven locations of urban origins, has advanced the case that cities are based on this voice, present at the sites of the dead.⁸ The popular culture version is pure Stephen King: a suburban development is built on top of an old burial ground. Residents begin to experience acts of vengeance, from mysteriously crashing glassware to the more extreme subsidence

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

of foundations and liquification of floors and walls. We need go no further with this comparison; the images of ghouls coming out of swimming pools is standard horror story furniture.

Rather, it is our goal to show how metalepsis (1) is the only adequate theoretical means of addressing the essence of cities' sheltering function; (2) how the multiplicity of seemingly contradictory functions and ideas is accommodated within a metaleptic structure; and (3) how McLuhan's thermodynamic system can be extended not by developing the middle of a binary signifier but, rather, by "doing as McLuhan did," i.e. seeing the interior of each term as a negative inscription, a para-site, a self-expanding and self-destroying substantial "biomass." The much-abused idea of *autopoiesis* actually involves the idea of continuance through negation and contradiction. Whatever can contain its own destruction is also capable of life — life that is a series of "emergences" of unlikely forms and actions out of a simple base. The alternative to autopoiesis is instrumentalism of repetition, the uncontrolled proliferation of a cancer where negation has been eliminated or simply unplugged (compulsion, cliché, ideology, the oppression of technology). We advocate metalepsis as a "life over death" solution, an account of the *im*-mediacy of desire as act.

Much of contemporary theorizing about the architecture of the city is limited by an over-commitment to the use of "screen," in thinking and in representation. The 2-sphere of the earth's surface involves, whenever "flat" representations of it are made, unresolvable errors that require compromises of scale, projection, and shape. But, optical perception is spherical, time has its own curves and folds, and there is nothing Euclidean in the senses or experience apart from the desire to know ("flatly," the projection to screens), and to be known as one is known (the "kensis" of the 2-sphere topology). Any signifying chain, whether it's drawn on paper, or on a screen, or entirely in the imagination, retains gaps that are holes in the matrix, in the sheltering home of space. The mediate representation confronts the im-mediate of desire through double gates, which are both beside each other and inside each other. The Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa represented this gate in his famous Brion Cemetery project as a *vesica pisces* whose left and right circles were coded red and blue, respectively. Viewed from the interior and exterior, the code retained its rule of chirality of red-left and blue-right: interior and exterior were convertible — Lacan's idea of "extimacy." In this relation of chirality to extimacy, we find that, between the cathexis of representation and the topology of *kenosis*, there is a remainder, a gap. This gap is the key to the immediacy of desire-as-act.

THE WORKSHOP AS "ZAIRJA"

The metalepsis workshop pursues themes generated by participants and accelerates conversation using film clips. In the case of the *Mediated Cities Conference* the leitmotifs of McLuhan's thermodynamics and the visibility of the city within the memory of film open way to the two ideas of the double frame, the "nose" intruding from the space of production into the space of representation, and the "matrix" whose multiple senses (womb, woman, original site) lay the ground for discovering "sites of exception" within the cityscape/mediascape of Los Angeles.⁹

Metalepsis is a framing/sheltering operation, evident in distinctive ways in literature and other arts. Its logic, however, belongs to the *Psyche*, in the largest sense of the word, which originally designated the soul. The soul we envisage as the ultimate and original of a device that was known by the Eleventh Century to Arabic, Lurianic, and Christian mystics, the *zairja*. This was primarily a diagrammatic schema, a matrix involving astrological and astronomical data as well as geometric devices taken from the arts of memory. The *zairja* was a computer — the first computer in fact — but the point of the *zairja* was not to make muddy thoughts clear but, rather, the reverse: to remove thoughts from their original contexts in order to liberate them. The aim was something like "unlimited semiosis," the ability of any thought to form a copula/predication with any other thought. Like the ancient tradition of carnival, where disguise promoted the copulation between the lower with the upper classes in order to strengthen genetic pools that would otherwise become sterile through endogamy, the *zairja*'s aim

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

was to disguise thoughts with its own version of a full-body domino. Lawrence Durrell: “One feels free in this disguise to do whatever one likes without prohibition. You cannot tell whether you are dancing with a man or a woman. The dark tides of Eros, which demand full secrecy if they are to overflow the human soul, burst out during carnival.”¹⁰

The freedom of unlimited semiosis is the freedom of subjectivity in a psychoanalytical sense. Psychoanalysis can address the symptom, the use of the body by the unconscious to create demi-signs to “signalize” emotional events to the consciousness. Once the interpretive task has been accomplished, psychoanalysis concludes. Lacan specified, however, a *coda* to psychoanalysis, a project lying beyond its interpretive reach. This was the search for the *sinthome*, the ancient French way of writing symptom and also a more comprehensive idea. While the symptom is based on the unknowability of desire, *jouissance*, the *sinthome* is about the recovery and repair of the Psyche that has been broken by desire. Lacan imagined subjectivity in terms of three regional functions, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. Represented as rings of a Borromeo knot, they linked with a Möbius-band logic, each ring lying on top of the previous ring, with the “last” ring unaccountably slipping beneath the “first” (“first” and “last” cannot be specifically located in the knot; like the Möbius-band, there is no specific place where one can locate a specific “twist”).

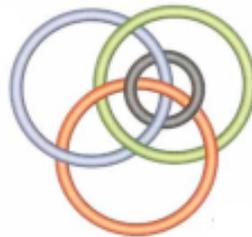


Figure 2. The *sinthome* as a fourth ring “repairing” the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real relations

The *sinthome* works like a fourth ring. When the subjective system breaks, the Borromeo knot cannot achieve its topological bond. The *sinthome* is a small ring that repairs the break between the Symbolic and its adjacent rings, the Imaginary and the Real. This healing act can be modeled through metalepsis through one of three primary apothecaries:

- The critical system of Harold Bloom, elaborated in his famous early work, *Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Here, the break occurring within subjectivity takes place with the invasion of *Eros* as “dæmon,” mirrored in the response of retreat, *askesis*. The horizon/frame mediating this invasion/retreat can be viewed from four angles: *tesseract* (the coded fragment), *clinamen* (the exception, the swerve), *kenosis* (knowing without knowing), and *apophrades* (the voice and return of the dead). Because each term has an extensive anthropological as well as poetic history, this is a primary and nearly unlimited resource for studying the *sinthome*.
- Films that use metalepsis also tend to be about *sinthomatic* situations: death dreams (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Mulholland Drive*), asynchrony (*Memento*, *Pulp Fiction*), and “detached virtuality” (*The Wizard of Oz*, *Lost Horizon*), where the Borgesian themes of the double, travel through time, the story in the story, and contamination of reality by the dream dominate.
- “Psychotheology,” a term coined by Eric Santner, covers a third and liminal zone of the *sinthome*, the limits of love and language developed by artists such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Raymond Roussel (the list is extensive).¹¹ In architecture as well as poetry, this is the zone of the epiphany, the “site of exception,” the miracle. This third and most difficult of resources cannot be neatly encoded within the metalepsis workshop because its methods as well as its contents correspond

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University
Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

to the function of “emergence,” where no predictable link can be found between antecedent conditions and outcomes. Indeed, the ideas of antecedent and result, cause and effect, beginning and end dissolve within this category of unlimited semiosis. One could say that where Bloom’s system and filmic examples constitute mirror images of each other (one structural, the other anarchic), psychotheology opens the way to Eros as a “pure void,” the mediatrix as such. Here, we move from analogy to anagogy, a move that can be accommodated only as an unplanned *act* — wonderful in experience but not something that can be predicted or easily described. The most that can be said is that the mediatrix requires “readiness,” an open attitude that “faces future.” The possibility of this is the motivation for having a workshop in the first place, in contrast to the usual one-way scholarly presentation.

References

¹ We develop this reversal through the idea of “reversed predication,” a reversal of the polarity of conventional causal-temporal direction, generalized as “predication.” Like the flip of figure and ground, consciousness has unwittingly laid the ground for this reversal, and the experience is akin to a *déjà vu* merger of imagination and memory. See Donald Kunze, “Metalepsis of the Site of Exception,” in *Architecture against the Post-Political*, ed. Nadir Lahiji (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 124–148.

² Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1980).

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill: 1964), 22–32. “A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in ‘high definition’.... Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information” (22–23). The heat of a medium requires an equal and opposite input from the user-audience. Hot media require little participation, while “cool media are high in participation and completion by the audience” (23).

⁴ Gordon, W. Terrence, *McLuhan A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

⁵ Irina Aristarkhova, *Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University, 2012), 10–12.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁷ Where place, divine word from a supernatural source, and the uncanny are involved, the term *apophrades*, borrowed from Harold Bloom’s well-known *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom’s five paired terms (*clinamen/tesseract*, *kenosis/apophrades*, and *demon/askesis*) can be shown also to relate to the sympathetic pairing of place and pregnancy, origins and sheltering as uncanny. We argue that metalepsis and its complementary term, *catalepsis*, are the only critical means to move forward with any one of these component ideas while retaining the rich associations of related meanings and traditions.

⁸ Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971).

⁹ A workshop web site describes the history, conceptual background, and diverse potential outcomes of the workshop: Donald Kunze, Carolina Dayer, and Berrin Terim, “Metalepsis Workshop,” April 1, 2014, <http://metalepsisworkshop.com>. An extensive archive of position papers can also be found by Googling terms with such words as “metalepsis architecture,” “metalepsis Lacan,” and “reversed predication,” “Lacan’s L-scheme,” “extimacy Lacan.” An archive of position papers is maintained at <http://art3idea.psu.edu>.

¹⁰ Lawrence Durrell, *Mountolive, a Novel* (New York: Dutton, 1959), 343.

THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE

Architecture_MPS; Ravensbourne; Woodbury University

Los Angeles: 01—04 October, 2014

¹¹ Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).