

Reworking the Idea of the Architectural Uncanny: Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*

Hitchcock's Filmic Architecture

If any director could be credited for involving architecture at a "base level" of his filmic imagination, it would have to be Alfred Hitchcock. Although Jacques Tati's *Playtime* is perhaps the film most referenced for its biting critique of modern architecture, Hitchcock is less judgmental. He presents interiors, buildings, cities, and landscapes of our quotidian world without comment, except perhaps to say that our world is without a doubt a potentially spooky place.

Hitchcock is a master of what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has called the "demark" — the out-of-place detail that initiates a sense of unease. The best example of this is the 1963 film, *The Birds*. In the natural order, birds do not attract our attention, except for our occasional pleasure or admiration. But, once their behavior changes and they menace young children on their way home from school, they slip out of the natural order and set up a dynamic of the "uncanny."

This other order is well known in architectural criticism because of Anthony Vidler's admirable study, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*.¹ Vidler's take on the uncanny begins with Sigmund Freud's classic essay and moves onward to link the uncanny with the "essence" of modernism, to the extent that the entire sequence of architectural history from the Eighteenth Century onwards through Post-Modernism can be traced through the correlative psychology of the uncanny.

My view is that Vidler does not give enough attention to two aspects of the uncanny identified by Freud — two aspects which are unquestionably packed with architectural poten-

tiality. Freud draws these elements from the story he cites as central to the uncanny, E. T. A. Hoffman's famous short-story, "The Sandman." The child Nathanael, burning with curiosity about the mysterious late-night visits of his father's lawyer, Coppelius (whose name means "eye socket"), conceals himself to witness strange alchemical experiments. After his father's suspicious death following one experiment, an older Nathanael encounters an itinerant lens peddler, Coppola, who resembles the lawyer. Nathanael has fallen in love with a professor's beautiful daughter, Olympia. But, she's really a mechanized automaton Coppola has built with the professor. Spalanzani and Coppola argue and destroy the doll. Nathanael suffers a nervous breakdown but slowly recovers, until a final encounter with Coppelius provokes his suicide. In this story two themes dominate: optics and identity. Freud aligns optics with the tradition of the evil eye and the issue of identity with the time-honored theme of the double and its variations. Vidler pays attention to these themes but does not give measure to their antiquity.

Another objection I have to Vidler's review is his exclusive identification of the uncanny with modernism. In this effort, Vidler overlooks a key point made by Mladen Dolar in his essay on the central place of the uncanny in the psychology of Jacques Lacan.² Dolar demonstrates that the uncanny was not born of, but merely "set loose" by the Enlightenment; that, before modernism, it was confined within cultural practices (folklore, ritual, custom, etc.), where its effects were integrated within the dimensionalities of mythic, religious, and poetic thought.

The difference between an uncanny caused by modernity and an uncanny "set loose" by

modernity is considerable. First, we might study the uncanny as a co-effect of Enlightenment practices, emphasizing the role of our perception and reception of literature and other arts as newly receptive to "mechanisms" that were previously concealed by ideas of the sacred. For example, many have pointed out that Gothic literature arises precisely at the time of the French Revolution. The secular uncanny puts the subject in a state of psychological rather than a spiritual imbalance, and the implications for human action are strikingly different. Here, the themes of optics and identity are absolutely crucial.

In its secularized form, the uncanny becomes a matter of design. Artists employ its tricks. Audiences laugh and enjoy rather than tremble or cower. In the modern uncanny, optics and identity point us to issues of anamorphosis, psychological rivalry, and the variations on themes of the fantastic to play out an architecture that connects mythic thinking to modern conceptualism.³ The modern secular uncanny can in fact give us insight into the workings of the more mysterious pre-modern uncanny, which can be credited with architecture's most potent forces. After all, the *heimlich* relates directly to the home and the *unheimlich* to homelessness. Hitchcock's crafty application of these two features are invaluable for architectural discourse and critical theory.

Sigmund Freud's original essay begins with an etymological consideration of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.⁴ Curiously, the word *heimlich* (homey) is itself "uncanny," for it contains within its own philological past the seeds of the idea of the uncanny, in itself an important clue. The steps from the homely to the uncanny have to do with hiding things. In the sense that "hidden away" can be a *part of* coziness, it at first belongs to the security that can be offered by the home: concealment from the *eyes of strangers*. Later, however, the uncanny comes to specialize on this theme, emphasizing "something that ought to have remained a secret" but is *nonetheless discovered*; something that was "there all the time" but once brought to light becomes harmful or, at the very least, scary.

In returning E. T. A. Hoffman's short story, "The Sandman," we find not only the two themes that Freud cites as key to the uncanny — optics and identity crisis — but the struc-

ture of the story pre-figures many Hitchcock themes and characterizations. Like Nathanael, Hitchcock heroes are often fugitives from justice who must find the "evil father" to avoid punishment of the "good father." Like Olympia/Claire, Hitchcock heroines often begin as "constructs" (*Rear Window*, *The 39 Steps*, *Notorious*) but end up by saving the day. And, like "The Sandman" in general, Hitchcock crams in references to looking, looking-like, and literal optics (*Young and Innocent*, *Rear Window*). The reversed physics of the "inside frame" (point of view of the wrongly accused) involves both the issue of identity dysfunction and the visual practices of disguise, concealment, and surveillance. The structural relationships that organize these themes force us to look at larger issues.

Optics and identity taken together produce an "anamorphic" condition, where imagery directly challenges identity by destabilizing the point of view or demanding a circuitous path to find a special "angle" on the truth — a point from which everything will be made clear.⁵ This quest becomes a literal journey across a landscape. At the scale of logic we find a succinct miniaturization of this "truth-seeking movement," what Jacques Lacan called the "master signifier." Ordinarily, a signifier does not lead directly to meaning but, rather, to other signifiers, as in the example of a dictionary. So, what "locks in" meanings that gain ideological and imaginative force? Lacan argues that it cannot be any relationship to the facts of reality, which could be checked and found wanting. Rather, truly compelling meanings are formed when the signifier has a "structural" and "self-referential" relationship with itself — and forces *reality* to conform to it!

Rex Butler uses the example of the Stephen Spielberg film, *Jaws* (1975).⁶ The shark first appears as a vague threat, but the public connects it to various imagined "reasons": punishment for human incursion on nature, for teenagers having sex in the water, or for the greed of business men wanting to keep the beach open at all costs. At some point, the shark, which has until this point been a part of the *effects*, becomes a *summation* and then a *cause*; as cause, the shark must be destroyed. Butler points out that this grim logic has also been used to create the anti-Semitic image of the Jew.

In the case of Hitchcock, we might say that the master signifier, a condensation of the uncanny, is integrated through the technique of anamorphosis, typically involving someone who is wrongly accused of a crime (like the shark and the Jew!) and who faces two kinds of opposition, the “good Other” and the “bad Other.” This formula involves buildings and the landscape as central media, where normal projective views are reconstructed by the “inside frame” initiated by false accusation. Space is seen “from the inside out,” focused on spots that are problematically empty.

The Madness of the Acute Angle



Figure 1. *North by Northwest* title frame.

How the uncanny works in practice can be demonstrated by one of Hitchcock’s most famous (and most architecturally modernistic) films, *North by Northwest* (1959). *NxNW* — whose very title suggests the uncanny theme of “looking awry” as related to madness — begins with a visual-acoustic essay on the “angular” quality of modern urbanism.⁷ The titles unfold to the spiky music of Bernard Herrmann in front of an aerial oblique view of a modernist glass façade (Fig. 1). In 1959, such a shot would be an unambiguous citation of modern architecture as such. The lines of text align with the oblique lines of the mullions, tensioning it graphically and metaphorically within the contemporary urbanity. This view cuts to scenes of crowds pouring down stairs, squeezing out of elevators and doors of office buildings into busy streets. Hitchcock plays his traditional cameo role as a would-be passenger who has just missed a bus.

The urban squeeze theme is taken up by the lead character, Walter Thornhill (Cary Grant), ad executive. Thornhill steals a taxi and shoves his secretary in, saying that she needs medical attention. He rattles off instructions as they navigate to his boozy lunch at the Plaza Hotel. She returns to her chores as he enjoys a round of drinks with business chums. He has forgotten to ask her to call his mother, however, and summons a bell-hop just at the moment the boy is in the process of paging a “Mr. Kaplan.” Rising from his seat, he is inadvertently mistaken for Kaplan by (presumably) KGB spies who have used this ruse to locate the CIA agent they wish to kidnap. Ignoring Thornhill’s objections that he is not Kaplan, they whisk him away to a mansion on Long Island, where he is interrogated without success by the master spy, Vandamm, who masquerades as the mansion’s owner, Lester Townsend, a UN official. Thornhill is set up for a do-it-yourself assassination made to look like a case of drunken driving, but he escapes to the custody of the police, who cannot confirm his story when they visit the mansion. Thornhill visits the UN to confront Vandamm but meets the mansion’s real owner instead, the kindly UN official, Lester Townsend. A KGB assassin cuts short Thornhill’s interview by throwing a knife into Townsend’s back, and Thornhill is photographed as he removes the weapon from Townsend’s body (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Thornhill captured on film after removing the knife from Townsend’s back.

The case of mistaken identity and false accusation is complicated by the fact that Kaplan doesn’t exist. A fictional character is maintained by the CIA with a trail of hotel and phone records to draw the Russian agents

around the country. But, once Thornhill “becomes” Kaplan, the logical “lock” of the master signifier prevents his escape. He *is* Kaplan in the deep sense that he is the non-existent agent. Two wrongs make a super wrong in this case and it is up to Thornhill to live out the destiny of the “perdurable negative.” This identity problem is ironically underscored when Thornhill passes a monogrammed matchbook to the woman who has befriended him (Fig. 3). She asks what the “O” in his name, Walter O. Thornhill, stands for. He replies, “Nothing.”⁸



Figure 3. “ROT,” Thornhill’s initials (the “O” stands for nothing”).

At this point we can easily see that Thornhill is an “agent of the uncanny” simply on account of his identity problem. This is not simply a matter of being mistaken for someone else, but of being forced to take up a negative existence, a non-being. Kaplan robs him of being Thornhill but cannot be summoned to explain the ruse.

Carrying the theme of identity confusion further, the CIA and KGB, like Spalanzani and Coppolo, have invented a “doll.” Fleeing from the police on a train to Chicago, Thornhill has met Eve Kendall, a CIA agent planted in Vandamm’s circle. She fascinates Thornhill and hides him during a search of the train, but he soon comes to distrust her. She has given him instructions to meet Kaplan at the famous rural crossroads that is the signature of the film. Instead of Kaplan, Thornhill encounters an off-duty crop-duster armed with a machine-gun. Escaping this double-crossroads, he returns to Kendall’s hotel to confront her. Feeling romantically betrayed as well as politically duped, he creates a scene at an auction to

creates a scene at an auction to elude Vandamm and seek asylum with the police.

All along, the issue of identity (false accusation, confusion with Kaplan, etc.) has been coupled with an architecture of visual inversion. We first meet Thornhill as a “man of the crowd,” but he “stands out” as he stands up to the bell-hop’s call for Kaplan. He becomes the focus of the police first by escaping the spies’ attempt to kill him through the staged automobile accident; this focus is tightened when he is implicated dramatically as a murderer when Townsend is stabbed and falls into his arms in a very public reception room at the United Nations.



Figure 4. Hans Holbein, the Younger, “The Ambassadors” (1533). Reproduction courtesy of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London.

The optical inversion that puts Thornhill in the focus is akin to the blur in the famous portrait of two ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger (1533). The blur is a skull, visible from an oblique angle, a *memento mori* that scandalizes the pride and wealth of the two rich subjects of the projective painting (Fig. 4). The skull connects to a barely visible crucifix in the upper left of the painting, and the angles of these connections implicate the date of Good Friday, 1533, 4 p.m. as the precise time of the Apocalypse.⁹ In a quite similar way, the flash-bulbs of the photographers present in the UN waiting room invert the visual regime that has, until now, kept Thornhill

at the level of a generic “man in a gray flannel suit.”

From this point on, the uncanny becomes an architecture of inversion, and architecture becomes “officially uncanny.” Anamorphosis is both the spirit and the letter of the law that generates filmic logic and action. In fact, hasn’t Hitchcock alerted us to this plan all along? We have been given clues: the oblique angle of the façade in the opening credits, the UN’s dramatic lobby, the flip of space with the flash-bulbs that publicize Thornhill as a fugitive from the law, the use of compression for concealment in Eve Kendall’s Pullman sleeping compartment, the use of drunkenness or outlandishness in public situations (the mansion, driving, the auction) to effect an escape.

Hitchcock uses a trick he practiced in other films, most famously *The 39 Steps*. There, the fugitive, Richard Hannay, slips into the backstage of a political rally to escape the police chasing him outside. The politicians on stage think that he is the invited speaker, late for his keynote address. They motion him on to the stage, and he improvises a rousing political tirade, being momentarily invisible to the police because they would “never” think to look for him in such an exposed position, able to deliver a tirade on the British economic system while fleeing the police.

Isn’t this exactly the logic Jacques Lacan exposes, in his essay on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”? Here, the Minister steals a letter incriminating to the Queen and hides it in his apartment by, precisely, *not concealing it* but placing it casually in a letter bag with other letters.¹⁰ In *NxNW*, Thornhill confronts Vandamm at a public art auction but realizes that Vandamm’s agents surround him. To escape he begins bidding wildly on a piece, feigning an attitude of an art skeptic intent on disrupting the auction. The auctioneers call the police, so that when he punches out one of the agents, he’s taken away by the “other Other.” The police are intercepted by the “good Other,” the FBI/CIA chief who enlists Thornhill to finish the mission by explaining that Eve Kendall has been their valuable double agent all along.

In the final scene, the inverted cone of vision around the conditioned blind spot, the “inside frame,” is further spatialized. Action culminates at the monumental sculptural park, Mt.

Rushmore. Even here, Thornhill notes that “Teddy Roosevelt seems to be watching me!” Thanks to the cliff-sculptures’ scale inversion, we have the perfect setting for the film’s final architectural statement: an ultra-modernist house perched on the hills above the monument (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Thornhill hangs on to the stonework of the ultra-Modern house atop Mt. Rushmore.

Before we “rush more” towards the conclusion, we should take some time to look at this logic of scale-inversion. What function does it serve in the logic of the film’s production, and what function does it serve in the specifically *architectural* role in this logic?

From the Master Signifier to “Automaton” and “the Acousmatic Voice”

Anamorphosis is as much about the position of the subject as it is about the visually intriguing double-image. When the subject must “go somewhere” to “learn about something,” a value has been put on distance, the project of covering that distance, the topography connecting here and there, and the occasional unexpected collapse of distance.

Simply put, the uncanny is about blurring the simplistic distinctions between here and there. Instead, we get (1) the sudden eruption of the extremely remote in the heart of the familiar space of the home; (2) the unexpected presence of home amidst the radically alien; or (3) the double reading of the space of travel as both achieving something in proportion to the quantity or quality of travel.

This blurring as the hallmark of the uncanny was taken up by Lacan by the invented term *extimité* ("extimity," the weird twin of intimacy). Lacking a French word that would give the sense of the German *unheimlich* and also provide the perverse etymology, *extimité* rounds up all of the potential meanings of the uncanny and puts them in the single pot of boundary relationships.

Mladen Dolar comments:

... [T]raditional thought consisted of the constant effort to draw a clear line between the interior and the exterior. All the great philosophical conceptual pairs — essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc. — can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority. Now the dimension of *extimité* blurs this line. It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*.¹¹

In an action of back-generation, anamorphosis becomes the most persistent ambassador of the extimate. The dislodging of the point of view, the radical "exile" of the subject, and the topological differentiation of space and time based on something that must be or is feared to be known carry the uncanny into the regions of the quest, the pilgrimage, the journey narrative, the trial, and the chase. Note well that mere movement across the landscape does not count. Running an errand is not uncanny; neither is a pre-paid vacation to a Club Med resort. Authentic travel must involve, at each point, a balance between control and possibly saturation or exhaustion, between risk and the reliance on guides, *naveté* and the help of instruction.¹²

The interpretation of anamorphosis on the scale of the landscape is complemented by the subjectification of anamorphosis in the doubles that populate the literature of the uncanny. Here, the theme of the automaton plays an unexpected role. In the story of "The Sandman," Nathanael projected a witty, imaginative personality into the blank doll Olympia. Only the rude dismantling of the ro-

bot brought him to his senses; the doll's mind had been his own construction, and when its exteriority was destroyed, the *extimité* of his role was apparent. Eve Kendall, though not a robot, is the prototype of the "Bond Girl" — the spy who uses sex to trap the hero but may in fact may be his only salvation. The alluring double spy can be considered as a variation on the automaton theme if only because of the way she manages to elude identification by "playing herself." This is a variation, to be sure, of the Liar's Paradox, but a bit more clever.

The automaton is there to attract the gaze, as Hitchcock's choices of actresses indicates: Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, Ingrid Bergman, etc. But, the logic of this gaze dissolves the original sexual desire, just as the "Turning test" fascination of the automaton's apparent wit is based on a quick reversal of direction. The acquisitive gaze and the exploratory conversation return empty handed. Hitchcock's heroines combine the qualities of Hoffman's Olympia and Claire into woman able to play the machine but ultimately able to return to the role of the woman-in-control (*Rear Window*), the wounded survivor (*Notorious*), or the all-too-human dupe (*Vertigo*).

The gazes of characters, the audience, and the invisible Other are commingled. In sympathy to the tradition of the evil eye, the source of the Other's gaze often cannot be precisely identified. "Teddy Roosevelt seems to be looking at me" (Thornhill, as he looks through the binoculars at the Mt. Rushmore park center) is thus equivalent to the call of the bell-hop, a call to an empty location that, once filled, cannot be escaped.

Summary

Not only does Hitchcock feature modern architecture as such in *NxNW*: he demonstrates its unique relationship to the uncanny, confirming Vidler's main thesis. Yet, Hitchcock goes beyond Vidler by providing key insights into the operation of the uncanny's two main component parts: optics and identity. While Vidler left off a structural analysis of these and moved on from Freud's formative essay, Hitchcock provides tangible examples where the uncanny can be viewed technically, in terms of the employment of anamorphosis,

the inside frame, scale inversion, and the inventive (visual) application of the Lacanian idea of the “master signifier.”

Lacan allows us to go beyond Deleuze’s idea of the “demark” as, simply, the sign of something out of place, out of the natural order. Standing out takes on the signature of the uncanny as “something concealed that should not have come to light.” This coming-to-light has optical and logical consequences that can *only* be taken up by a comprehensive architectural re-structuring of space and time that uses literal architecture and landscapes to effect the inside-out flip initiated by the mechanics of the “inside frame.”

By appending the popular culture of film to Vidler’s study of the uncanny, the connection to pre-modern sources of the uncanny can be mapped with precision. In this project, the principal tools will come not only from masters of uncanny effects, such as Hitchcock, but also from theorists like Lacan, who rescued

the uncanny from Freud’s own unexplained neglect or who, like Dolan, have rescued it from Lacan’s complex other formulations. The cultural structures which had, before the Enlightenment, contained the uncanny within ritual, magic, and myth can be revived, and their former scholarly contexts — the liminal, the raw and the cooked, the myth, and the rhetoric of wit — can be restored to a functional role within architectural thinking.

Endnotes

¹ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge MA: 1992).

² Mladen Dolan, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (Autumn 1991): 5-23.

³ The over-identification of the uncanny with modernism ignores the wealth of materials available through studies of such widely recognized anthropological themes as the liminal. Articulated initially by Arnold VanGennep, Victor Turner and his associates popularized their ethnographic materials and methodology through such books as *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵ Anamorphosis goes well beyond the Early Modern practices emphasized in most studies, where two-dimensional images were constructed to be seen correctly from only one point of view. In his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1991), Slavoj Žižek argues that the themes of obliqueness and sideways viewing were mainstays

of thought by the time of Shakespeare, where the idea was already integrated into popular culture forms.

⁶ Rex Butler, “What Is a Master Signifier,” Slavoj Žižek: *Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 31-65.

⁷ The title is derived from a phrase spoken by Hamlet to Gildenstern: “I am but mad north-north-west ... when the wind is southerly, I can tell a hawk from a handsaw.” The means that Hamlet knows when to feign madness when necessary. The theme of angular view is widespread in Shakespeare. The directional reference may have a more specific geographic reference, according to Peter Usher: “... [M]adness is associated with Elsinore, where Claudius resides and which lies almost exactly north-north-west of Ven, while Wittenberg lies in a southerly direction from Ven. It is from Wittenberg that appearances are correctly interpreted,” “Hamlet and Infinite Universe,” *Bulletin of the American Astronomical Society* 28 (1996): 1305. For more references to oblique anamorphism and literature, see Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1991).

⁸ In the lore of film production, the “O.” was a reference to David O. Selznick, Hitchcock’s problematic American producer. Selznick’s “O.” also “stood for

nothing," but it is likely the Hitchcock got extra mileage out of Thornhill's use of it in his role as a stand-in for a non-existent spy.

⁹ John North, *The Ambassadors' Secret: Holbein and the World of the Renaissance* (New York: Hambleton and London, 2004).

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'the Purloined Letter,'" *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 6-50.

¹¹ Mladen Dolar, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹² For an interesting parallel between uncanny travel and a definition of "authentic" travel, see Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., "Odysseus as Traveller: A Categorical Study, *Categories: A Colloquium*, ed. Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. (University Park PA: Department of Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University, 1978), pp. 103-120.