

# Genius Loci

Mark Jackson

## Introduction

This paper, as with others in this series, takes its impetus from the short text 'Genius' by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben alerts us to the complications in coming to an understanding of this notion, from its origins in the Roman god given to each of us at birth, to something like what crucially constitutes the impulses of life in our animal bodies:

But Genius is not only spirituality, it doesn't appertain only to things that we are used to considering as the highest and most noble. All that is impersonal in us is ingenious. Above all, ingenious is the force that drives the blood coursing through our veins, or that which causes us to sink into a deep sleep; ingenious is the unknown power in our bodies that regulates and distributes warmth so delicately, and limbers up or contracts the fibres of our muscles. It is genius who we obscurely exhibit in the intimacy of our physiological life, there where the most personal is the most alien and impersonal, the closest is the most remote and uncontrollable (Agamben, 2006: 96).

There is also a legacy, in architectural discourse, of this notion of genius which is expressed in the term, 'genius loci', translated as the 'spirit of place' or what, in a fundamental way, constitutes the taking place of architecture as its essential constituting force. Would it be possible to pose for architecture the kinds of complications offered by Agamben with his notion of genius? This would amount to developing some complicity between what I understand as the essential constituting force of architecture's 'taking place', and the very drives that make up the impulsive becoming of bodies. This paper approaches the possibility of considering such a complicity in a reading of two texts by the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, both written at about the same time. One concerns architecture and sublimation discussed in the context of perspectival space and anamorphic construction; the other concerns the subversion of the subject as a void or nothing for the signifier. Both texts are particularly concerned with an understanding of the notion of the void or nothing that is constitutive of a self or architecture as such.

## Sublimation and the Thing

Lacan's mention of architecture is found in *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992 [1959-60]). This material is discussed by Lorens Holm in his essay, "What Lacan said re: architecture" (2000). Holm stresses that Lacan didn't ever say very much about architecture, and perhaps what is more interesting is what architectural theorists say about Lacan, that his comments directly addressing architecture are confined to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Holm, 2000: 29).

However, it must be noted that Lacan does indeed discuss architecture in later seminars (in particular *Seminars IX, XI, XVIII and XIX*). In *Seminar VII*, Lacan addresses architecture in a chapter titled "Marginal comments". What is interesting here is that these comments do not figure as marginal because they are not stitched onto the end of the seminar, nor are they an addendum to something else, but rather they operate as a kind of *apologia*, an apology for not being prepared:

I am not this morning in a state of readiness I consider necessary for me to conduct my seminar in the usual manner. And this is especially the case, given the point we have reached, when I particularly want to be able to present you with some very precise formulas. You will thus allow me to put it off until next time (Lacan, 1992: 128).

Lacan wants to talk about Courtly Love in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a presentation of anamorphosis, and some weeks later he will do just that. Where he was up to is an emptiness that needs to be skirted around, as if something essential is veiled enough to leave him unprepared to address it with precise formulas. This week's class in the seminar is a filler, a circling around what Lacan actually wants to get at. What he wants to do is present some introductory remarks on anamorphosis, or the scant view, the oblique view of what concerns him directly such that something other comes into view. At stake is his discussion of sublimation in relation to the pleasure principle, and an articulation of how sublimation is constitutive of art, religion and science, which is to say, constitutive of human creation, belief and knowledge, or truth. Sublimation of what? This is sublimation of the Thing, what can never be approached directly:

Neither science nor religion is of a kind to save the Thing or to give it to us, because the magic circle that separates us from it is imposed by our relation to the signifier. As I have told you, the Thing is that which in the real suffers from this fundamental, initial relation, which commits man to the ways of the signifier by reason of the fact that he is subjected to what Freud calls the pleasure principle, and which, I hope it is clear in your minds, is nothing else than the dominance of the signifier - I, of course, mean the true pleasure principle as it functions in Freud (Lacan, 1992: 134).

What is crucial for Lacan is that while perspective will shore up the processes of sublimation, anamorphosis can precisely show these processes. But I am moving ahead of myself. Lacan suggests that primitive architecture can be defined as something organised around emptiness. He does not mean by this that architecture is a kind of shell determined around an internal void because an empty space needs to be filled up with habitation. This emptiness is what he will qualify by the sacred, and in that sense, not for habitation but for the infinite Thing. The Thing is severed from us, perhaps a Father radically severed or cut from us, perhaps Judaic more so than Greek. Yet, in what he is saying here, Lacan will be doing nothing other than re-emphasising what he had already discussed the week before, precisely in the class titled, "On creation *ex nihilo*".

## The Father Thing: God is dead

Lacan emphasises, on many occasions, his faithfulness to Freud, that all of Freud commences with, and never ceases to ask, the question, "What is the father" and ceaselessly works through the father's murder. At the conclusion of the chapter "On creation *ex nihilo*", Lacan notes:

It is obvious that God is dead. That is something Freud expresses from one end of his myth to the other; since God derives from the fact that the Father is dead, that clearly means we have all noticed that God is dead (126).

Lacan is treating here the relation between the creature and the creator, the attributions of creation in processes of sublimation of the creature's drives at the insistence of the signifier as constitution of pleasure:

And here we encounter linguistic usage that, at least in connection with sublimation in the sphere of art, never hesitates to speak of creation. We must now, therefore, consider the notion of creation with all it implies, a knowledge of the creature and of the creator, because it is central, not only for our theme of the motive of sublimation, but also that of ethics in its broadest sense (119).

A number of key notions need to be kept in play. The Thing is fundamentally veiled, concealed, hidden, by precisely that which we encircle or bypass in order to conceive of it. It is that which, in the real, suffers from the signifier, as an emptiness un-representable. The Thing is the place of the drives, and this place is what I want to emphasise throughout this paper as a concern with *genius loci*. "I" am that nothing that separates the organization of a signifying network as representation and the constitution in the real of the place in which the field of the Thing as such presents itself. For Lacan, the real is not 'reality' as we would conceive of our world securely known. Rather, such a notion of reality is constituted, for Lacan, through the signifying structures of language and imaginary, or fantasy projections. The real is constituted in that lost Thing referred to here, and constitutes the unsecurable object of desire. This place of the Thing, determinable in our bypassing or encircling it, is the locus of the object, always already constituted as found, or more precisely refound, as if it has been lost. It would be what we have been looking for, as if it were there all along to find. This re-finding opens the Thing - by virtue of its structure - to be represented by something else, and, in this sense of a something else, the locus is always already doubled. Moreover, as it is the human creature that is capable of manipulating signifiers, this creature is the creator of that which will come to represent the Thing, that place of the creature's drives. The function of the pleasure principle is to lead this creature, as subject, from signifier to signifier.

The signifying network will sublimate what is not bearable in the Thing, as the hole in the real. But every fabrication, every creation will be possible only from the position of this hole, this nothing in the real that is the Thing. Every creation is *ex-nihilo*, or from the place of the nothing, which is to say from the locus of the drives. Here can be recognised a repetition with Hegel, in the sacred origins of primitive architecture already necessitating a prior originary moment in the

still more primitive vessel that will serve as its model (Hegel, 1975: 632). However, I would also emphasise that there is a strict refusal of Hegel in that the veiled Thing, the nothing, the sacred will not arrive as the Other Thing, as a process of sublation, of dialectical mastery. This may be emphasised in Lacan's repeated insistence that the unconscious is not in a relation of negation to consciousness: "In the Freudian field, the words notwithstanding, consciousness is a characteristic that is as obsolete to us in grounding the unconscious - for we cannot ground it on the negation of consciousness ..." (Lacan, 2002: 286). That sublimation is not coterminous with sublation may be emphasised in a marginal comment made by Lacan concerning the equivalence of the fashioning of the signifier, and the introduction of a gap or hole in the real. He suggests:

Modern science, the kind that was born with Galileo, could only have developed out of biblical or judaic ideology, and not out of ancient philosophy or the Aristotelian tradition. The increasing power of symbolic mastery has not stopped enlarging its field of operation since Galileo, has not stopped consuming around it any reference that would limit its scope to intuited data; by allowing free reign to the play of signifiers, it has given rise to a science whose laws develop in the direction of an increasingly coherent whole, but without anything being less motivated than what exists at any given point (Lacan, 1992: 122).

This "given point" would be entirely the point of perspective's infinitising, its vanishing points whose cones of projection enable a subject, and a world, to find their moment on an abstract plane of existence. And this would be the death of God: "In other words, the vault of the heavens no longer exists, and all the celestial bodies, which are the best reference point there, appear as if they could just as well not be there" (122). This severance from the Father, this cut may be considered in the cut of perspective's cone of projection that constitutes the picture plane, and the orthogonal nature of this cut in all perspectival constructions constituting a centrism. The ex-centrism of this construction is established in an oblique cut that figures an ellipsis that is decentering in the distortions it projects. I read this ellipsis in anamorphism, as the necessity in having to reconstitute one's point of view. This contingency of a reference point is constitutive of the accident that ultimately grounds all knowing, and concedes truth, in truth, as trauma. Trauma is understood in terms of a repetition anxiety triggered by accident. The import of this Lacanian reading is that the finding of the Other Thing, as the work of truth, is a compulsive repetition of circling the hole of the real that constitutes the essence of truth as a contingent accident.

### **Marginal projections**

Lacan suggests that, with the invention of perspective, this pictorial construction will first of all imitate architecture, as a two dimensional plane that projects a three dimensional volume, to the point where architecture itself will come to imitate the geometrical properties of perspective, as a three dimensional volume approximating a two dimensional plane; and in doing so architecture will come to represent itself (he is thinking, for example, of Palladio's theatre in Vicenza, the *Teatro Olimpico*, with its elaborately painted false perspective as a principal spatialising device). With the invention of anamorphism, though, something else

is going on. As Holm states, “architecture and perspective enter the symbolic order” (2000: 36). The symbolic order can be understood as a signifying network that constitutes the Other Thing as a naturalised standpoint, sublimating the trauma of the nothing of any “I” *ex nihilo*. Anamorphism allows us to see the signifying construction as such, and in this allows us to glimpse the veiled Thing, the stain that stands out as the emptiness, the absence of signification in the signifying network.

Holm outlines the series of examples offered by Lacan: Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, with its anamorphic smear in the lower right foreground read as *Vanitas*, or a skull from an oblique angle, at which angle the perspectival space of the painting can no longer be deciphered; “an eighteen-metre long fresco in a chapel built in Descartes’ time”; and “an anamorphic copy of a Rubens crucifixion, which is organised around a cylindrical mirror” (2000: 36). Lacan suggests that the pleasure of anamorphic images happens in that moment when something undecipherable pops into recognition. We glimpse the thing behind the surface of the imaginary register; we glimpse illusion as illusion, or the visual field as the Other Thing, as the signifying network’s play. When we pull back the visual field to see what is hidden behind it, it is the absent object as the cause of desire, an absence that motivates all of the drives - the visual world as screen for ordinary loss. This absent object Lacan names the ‘object *a*’. After *Seminar VII*, anamorphosis is most thoroughly treated by Lacan in *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, under the heading of, “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*”. If genius loci has a legacy in being considered as the sacred or spirit of place, an infinitising in the finitude of taking place, Lacan would suggest that this locus is that of the Thing, radically voided non-being around which creation’s signifying structures skirt in sublimation of the nothing. Architecture would, in this sense, be an originary voiding/avoiding in the securing of a creature’s existence, in which perspective is a shoring up of sublimation in a ‘natural’ standpoint, and anamorphosis is an encounter with the veiled Thing, locus of the motivation of all of the drives.

### **Separation constitutive of an “I”**

At the same time that Lacan was delivering his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he delivered a presentation titled, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (2002 [1960]). Through a series of increasingly tortuous graphs, Lacan charts the cut in the signifying chain that is constitutive of the subject of desire, and the relation of the unconscious to the constitution of this subject (2002: 291, 294, 300, 302). That is to say, he deals with the hole in the real that is the Thing and the network of signifiers that make this nothing into a *being*. This text also articulates more clearly Lacan’s relation to Hegel as a relation to Freud, or, in short, the difference for Lacan between Hegel and Freud, which amounts to a difference in how each differentiates truth (*savoir*) and knowing (*connaissance*).

I want to emphasise that when Lacan is discussing architecture, he is fundamentally addressing the locus of emptiness, or nothing, in the constitution of being, where the question of being, as such, cannot be separated from the question of the signifier and the signifying networks of a creature’s language. The spatialising of this locus adheres to the creature’s body. It will be determinable by the privileged instance of the delineating of

a cut that takes advantage of the anatomical characteristic of a margin or border: the lips, “the enclosure of the teeth,” the rim of the anus, the penile groove, the vagina, and the slit formed by the eyelid, not to mention the hollow of the ear (303).

These anatomical marks are constitutive of cuts in a creature’s body, assimilable to a metabolism of needs, and out of which come objects cut from this creature’s body, “the mamilla, the feces, the phallus (as an imaginary object), and the urinary flow. (An unthinkable list, unless we add ... the phoneme, the gaze, the voice ... and the nothing) (303). Two preliminary comments on these cuts. First, the body’s drives will isolate these cuts or “erogenous zones ... from the function’s metabolism” (303). That is what the drives do, and their isolating phenomenon is the locus or locale we are suggesting as the nothing of the Thing. Second, these objects “have no specular image ... no alterity”, which means there is no Other Thing that establishes these objects in a signifying network (303). This enables “them to be the ‘stuff’ or ... the lining” of what will have become the subject, but not the reverse of the subject, that one takes to be the speaking subject, the “subject of consciousness” (303). Rather,

this subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is nothing but such an object. ... It is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes (303).

If, as Lacan suggests, “a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier”, “I” as subject come on the scene as the being of non-being, as the trace of what must be in order to fall from being, of a true survival abolished by a knowledge of itself, and by a discourse in which it is death that sustains existence, under the formula: “He did not know that he was dead” as the relation of the subject to the signifier in an enunciation whose being trembles with the vacillation that comes back to it from its own statement (304). We need to see in this a precise articulation of anamorphism, of a supposedly radical loss of disclosure, whose true disclosure is the disclosure of the scene of radical loss. This would also be within the province of all accounting or forms of bookkeeping for filiation and history. Genius Loci bears on the place of this radical loss that is circled around, the Thing obliquely glimpsed, this Thing that is also a No-Thing, in the sense that the Thing and its place are not necessarily distinguishable. Lacan emphasises that the creature’s body, its real stuff, is born prematurely, which has significant implications on how this body of drives and metabolism negotiates its prolonged dependency, primarily in the relations of need and demand that it establishes, where demand is constituted in the signifier, which is to say in the inter- and intra-subjective. Primarily constituted in dependency, all demand made by this creature will be demand for love from the Other, where love is understood in an economy of deficiency; love will come to be what the Other cannot give, the fault of the Other. However, there is a third term, irreducible to demand and need, and this is desire that is articulated but not articulable:

there is no demand that does not in some respect pass through the de-files of the signifier. ... man’s inability to move, much less be self-sufficient, for some time after birth provides grounds for a psychology of dependence, ... this dependence is maintained by a universe of

language. ... needs have been diversified and geared down by and through language to such an extent that their import appears to be of quite a different order. ... these needs have passed over into the register of desire. ... What psychoanalysis shows us about desire in what might be called its most natural function, since the survival of the species depends on it, is not only that it is subjected, in its agency, its appropriation, and even its very normality, to the accidents of the subject's history (the notion of trauma as contingency), but also that all this requires the assistance of structural elements - which, in order to intervene, can do very well without these accidents. The inharmonious, unexpected, and recalcitrant impact of these elements certainly seems to leave to the experience [of desire in its most natural function] a residue that drove Freud to admit that sexuality had to bear the mark of some hardly natural flaw (297-298).

These structural elements, locus of the signifier, are constituted in the unconscious, or what the subject does not know he is saying. The locus of the signifier is the Other (who does not exist other than as a structural locus of the enunciating subject): "No authoritative statement has any other guarantee than its very enunciation" (298). There cannot be another signifier that is not in this locus, in the sense "that there is no Other of the Other", which is to say, "there can be no metalanguage", no other to language outside of language by which language would be understood (298). We cannot emphasise enough this formula of Lacan's that is easily glided over or missed, "that there is no Other of the Other", which means that there is no locus of exteriority to the structural element of the unconscious to which a subject has recourse as a verification of a statement of authority or authenticity. The Other is not the other person or thing, neither as substance or locus. As we have said, all demand implies a request for love, while desire "begins to take shape in the margin in which demand rips away from need", where need becomes *represented* by a subjective opacity, producing the substance of desire, and demand becomes anxiety as unconditional appeal to the Other, a signifying network, having "no universal satisfaction" (299).

The Other's response, which is to say the response of the place of the signifier, to a subject of demand, in deficit, is a "phantom of Omnipotence" in the sense that the question of the Other comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects a reply to "What do you want?" (299-300). The question "leads the subject to the path of his own desire" by reformulating it, "without knowing it", as "What does he want from me?" (300). Crucial to this creature's relation to his desire is not a concern with what he demands, but a concern as to *where* he desires. I am maintaining the notion of creature in order to emphasise Lacan's discussion of creation *ex nihilo* as "a question of what man does when he makes a signifier" (Lacan, 1992: 119). Hence, "the unconscious is (the) discourse of the Other ... (objective determination)", and "man's desire is the Other's desire ... a 'subjective determination' - namely, that it is qua Other that man desires (this is what provides the true scope of human passion)" (Lacan, 2002: 300). And desire changes according to fantasy as that which "is really the 'stuff' of the *I* that is primarily repressed" (302). The subject of the unconscious cannot be designated as the subject of a statement, as the articulator, since this subject of the unconscious, from the place of the Other, "does not even know he is speaking" (302). Hence, it can be understood how it is that the discourse of the drives will come to articu-

late this subject, now “designated on the basis of a pinpointing that is organic, oral and anal” such that “the more he speaks, the further he is from speaking” (302).

Only the cut, that trait that distinguishes the drive from its organic function, remains as a signifier (302). As there can be no Other of the Other, the subject’s unconscious enunciation can only be located in the Other as that Other’s lack, its deficit. It is only in this sense that the subject is a lack, void, nothing for a signifier. But this void or nothing is the shoring up or protection of the place of the “I”, a protecting or sheltering that goes by the name *jouissance*, which requires more complexity in its translations than terms such as ‘ecstatic pleasure’. *Jouissance* should not be collapsed with desire, or with a notion of pleasure or satisfaction. If it is a place of shelter or protection, it protects precisely the contingent nothing that I am, and shores it up for and against demand’s response constituted in a signifying network. Hence, the subject cannot be that Other’s Other. In this sense the signifier, the locus of the Other is that which represents the subject for another signifier:

*I am in the place from which ‘the universe is a flaw in the purity of Non-Being’ is vociferated. ... by protecting itself, this place makes Being itself languish. This place is called *Jouissance*, and it is *Jouissance* whose absence would render the universe vain (305).*

*Jouissance* is the locus of the nothing of the signifier for which all other signifiers represent the subject, the emptiness that is the hole in the real around which we skirt. Through an economy that perhaps marks the fundamental structure of the *oikos*, household, holy family or filiations to dead fathers and mothers, this *jouissance* is usually forbidden me:

Am I responsible for it, then? Yes, of course. Is this *Jouissance*, the lack of which makes the Other inconsistent, mine, then? Experience proves that it is usually forbidden me, not only, as certain fools would have it, due to bad societal arrangements, but, I would say, because the Other is to blame - if he was to exist, that is. But since he doesn’t exist, all that’s left for me is to place the blame on I, that is, to believe in what experience leads us all to, Freud at the head of the list: original sin (305).

Thus, Lacan suggests “that *jouissance* is prohibited to whomever speaks. ... it is pleasure that sets limits to *jouissance*, pleasure as what binds incoherent life together” (306). The mark of the prohibition of the infinitude of *jouissance*, the finitude of the subject inscribed in the pleasure of the signifying network, is signified in the unnatural splitting of sexuality at the level of the interventions of desire as the locus of the Other: the phallus as negativity in the place of the specular image, the object *a* or Thing, that non-being which we encircle in order to be (306). In this sense, the phallus embodies “*jouissance* in the dialectic of desire”, while castration is the name given to the work of the signifying network in the pleasure principle, as a principle of sacrifice but as well as the possibility of knowing (307).

Genius loci could be thought of as that place of the Other, whose demand we make our own, whose locus is the locus of the discourse of our unconscious enunciation, and whose locale is that of our desire. But then, perhaps more radically, and

impossibly, genius loci would be that place called jouissance, an incoherency, stain of the real, stuff of the "I", infinitisation of the drives, glimpsed, in its horror perhaps, as our own deficit of being, the non-being that is the clamour of being: "For this subject, who thinks he can accede to himself by designating himself in the statement, is nothing but such an object" (303). Would this enable me to say something more concerning architecture, where I would think of architecture as a locus of structural elements, in the abstract sense that I have given for an understanding of jouissance? This would suggest that something is always already forbidden in architecture's presentation. In a way, Lacan has said as much in his pronouncement on the void that centres architecture and the skirting around of this Thing, or the glimpse that can be made of the horror once architecture enters the symbolic order of representation in something like a sublation to painting, in anamorphism.

Equally, I would acknowledge a long history of architecture's Classical legacy in deriving from its *genius loci*, its authentic or originating unfolding in the circumstance of its place, placing or placement. But, ultimately, it is necessary to recognise that the Thing is not a material substance in the world, veiled in its knowing, a form-content relation waiting for revelation or actualisation, that self and world are not bifurcated like this. What Lacan says regarding architecture attunes us more closely to something essential in the primordial relations that establish the structural elements for the signifying networks of architecture's discourses: separation, locus, protection. It is, perhaps, protection as a sheltering securing that is privileged here, and one would want to understand how Lacanian jouissance, as a forbidden protecting locale, is at once a primordial articulation of the essence of architecture, and a powerful moment of critical analysis, resonating with the uncanny in both Freud and Heidegger, as a primordial relation to homelessness.

## References

- Agamben, G. (2006). Genius (L. Simmons, Trans.). *Interstices: A Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* (7), 94-99
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1975). *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. (T.M. Knox, Trans.). 2 Vols. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Holm, L. (2000). What Lacan said re: Architecture. *Critical Quarterly* (42, 2), 29-64.
- Lacan, J. (2002). The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious. (B. Fink. Trans. in collaboration with H. Fink and R. Grigg). In *Écrits: A Selection* (pp. 281-312). New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1992). *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. J.A. Miller (Ed.), (D. Porter, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. (1994). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin.