



Psychic Space as the Structure of Unconscious Fantasy

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Authors' note: Our contribution to this Lacanian issue of *Psyart* intends not to foreground a specifically Lacanian reading of our film examples, but rather to serve as an example of how Lacan's highly topological theory may be integrated in the larger field of psychoanalytic discourse, both because his topologies are inspired by Freud (indeed, Lacan refers to his entire endeavor as the exploration of a Freudian topology, *le champ freudien*), and because Lacan's theory serves as a crucial source for fellow travelers such as Laplanche and Pontalis, whose work we do consult specifically in our essay. In other words, we think it is important to emphasize that the continued viability and importance of Lacanian theory depends on its ability to be integrated with the work of other theorists, rather than requiring that commentators subscribe to full-fledged "Lacanianism" as a school or doctrine. We think this is an unfortunate perception in our field, as it may actually restrict the use of Lacanian insights as a resource for a wide range of theoretical inquiry.

To cite as:

Blum, Virginia, and Anna Secor, 2022, "Psychic Space as the Structure of Unconscious Fantasy," *PsyArt* 26, pp. 57-85.

In other words, we want to show how Lacan may be consulted within a wider theoretical field of sources, rather than as a figure requiring adherence to a single dogma or school, especially since contemporary Lacanianism itself represents many different sectarian factions.

The distinction between material and psychic reality has been at the center of psychoanalytic inquiry since even prior to Freud's pivotal reconsideration of his "seduction theory" in 1897. Reconstruction vs. construction, narrative vs. historical truth, screen memories, the retroactive effect of puberty on childhood sexual memories along with status of retrospective reconstruction itself: these are all areas of debate and indeterminacy for analysts who struggle over the question of the primacy of fantasy vs. material circumstances (e.g., Freud 1937; Beres 1960; Blum 1979; Laplanche and Pontalis 1968; Ricoeur 1977; Schafer 1970; Schafer 1985; Schwaber 1986; Spence 1976). The role played by unconscious fantasy in shaping memory or symptoms is always a question of identifying the event as "psychic" or "material," internal or external. Where, in other words, are the events located-- externally or within the psychic apparatus itself? Did the father sexually molest the daughter or is her memory in fact an effect of her own Oedipal and unconscious fantasy? As Freud expressed it to Fliess, it is equally likely that the father's seduction is a fantasy because "there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect. (Accordingly, there would remain the solution that the sexual fantasy invariably seizes upon the theme of the parents.)" [1897, pp. 264-5]. The child is not necessarily "seized" helplessly and unwittingly by its material circumstances, Freud announces here; rather, the material circumstances present objects for the child's

unconscious fantasy to engage, or even give rise to as such (Laplanche 1989; Laplanche and Pontalis 1968). The perverse story has been reassigned and the subject of perversion has been relocated.¹

While many, including Freud himself, have argued that in the end it is often impossible to know the difference, there nevertheless remains a strong tendency in psychoanalytic theory and practice to separate historical truth from psychic truth. We are proposing to rethink the distinction between material and psychic reality in terms of the distinction between material and psychic space. The major historical shift in focus from outer trauma to inner psychic events and the fundamentally scenic structure of memory, especially traumatic memory, lead us to assert that space is a constitutive element of unconscious fantasy and vice versa. We will also argue that unconscious fantasy is a topological structure that operates simultaneously across an array of temporal, material and psychic zones, changing guises while sustaining intact the coordinates of its central relationships under diverse circumstances. Finally, we argue for the always already inseparability of psychic and material space, an inseparability made manifest in certain cases of trauma.

We will begin with Freud's famous example of a childhood trauma in *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and then discuss Jacob Arlow's account of how unconscious

¹ In *Studies in Hysteria* it is notable that memory seems strangely separable from the subject. Freud believes that he can effect cure through vacating traumatic memories. His hypnoses are largely devoted to "curing" women of their bad memories, memories which center on events that caused them fright or anxiety. As Freud and Breuer write, they suffer from "reminiscences" and it is of these that they must be purged (1893, p. 7). Originally, Freud tried to eliminate the traumatic memories altogether until he recognized that he should pursue instead the unconscious fantasy to which the memories are linked. That neurotics suffer from reminiscences has continued to be a cornerstone of psychoanalytic thought, long after such "reminiscences" were relocated from the patients' real experiences to their unconscious life.

fantasy resulted in a patient collapsing seemingly out of the blue. These examples will allow us to demonstrate what we mean by a topological approach as well as how instances of trauma make plain the workings of topological rather than topographical space. Through these cases, we aim to illustrate how a topological understanding of psychic-material space provides both an explanation of the origins of trauma and, for the individuals, a spatial solution for the management of traumatic affect. From there we will reconsider Jacob Arlow's influential account of unconscious fantasy, especially his comparison of unconscious fantasy to dual projections on a screen and how our understanding of unconscious fantasy substantially changes when we recognize space as constitutive rather than inoperative or reduced to a two-dimensional surface. We will further demonstrate the constitutive role of space in shaping unconscious fantasy and screen memory through an analysis of Antonioni's 1966 film, *Blow-Up*.

In our turn to topology, we follow Lacan, whose work became increasingly topological as he attempted to map the structure of the subject without being limited to surfaces that are fully graphable in three dimensional space. Topology is a branch of qualitative mathematics that understands space in a non-Euclidean framework. In Euclidean geometry, Cartesian coordinates allow location to be defined in terms of positions along intersecting axes. This is *topography*, mappable, graphable, measurable space. But topologically speaking, a space is not defined by the distances between points, but rather by the characteristics that it maintains in the process of distortion and transformation (bending, stretching, squeezing, but not breaking). Topology deals with surfaces and their properties, their boundedness, orientability, decomposition, and connectivity – that is, sets of properties that retain their relationships under processes of transformation. Thus the basic insight of the field of topology is that some spatial

problems depend not on the exact shapes of the objects involved, but on the ways that they are put together, their continuities and cuts. In *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972-1973), Lacan refers to the “strict equivalence between topology and structure”, insisting that the topological structure of the subject is not an analogy or a metaphor (Lacan 1998, p. 9). In other words, topology for Lacan is not merely a more or less useful heuristic (like Freud’s topographies), but a real description of the relationships that structure the subject. It is thus from the perspective of Lacanian topology that we will argue that lived space is always both psychic and material, structured by the topology of unconscious fantasy, that is, by the set of relations that remain the same (repeat) regardless of displacements in time and space.

Lacan was particularly interested in conceptualizing the unconscious as a scene or location. He described the unconscious as the “other scene,” after Freud’s incorporation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of Fechner’s description of dreams as a different “scene of action” from that of waking life (Lacan 2002, p. 275; Freud 1900, pp. 48-49). In “The Signification of the Phallus,” Lacan observes that in relation to the “laws that govern this other scene . . . in the process, a topology, in the mathematical sense of the term, appears, without which one soon realizes that it is impossible to even note the structure of a symptom in the analytic sense of the term” (2002, p. 275). By this Lacan means that a topological approach enables an understanding of the repetitions that underlie and ensue from symptom formation, repetitions that are only recognizable as such through a topological analysis.

We believe that topology explains the scenic structure of unconscious fantasy, an interminably repeating structure in search of the original event. Jean Laplanche calls Freud’s analyses in *Studies on Hysteria* an “impassioned search for ‘scenes,’ for *the*

scene, and ultimately for the primal scene, [which] was fated to end in a dramatic experience of disillusionment” (1976, pp. 31-32). Perhaps the primal scene (primal here in the sense of original) can only be recovered spatially; such a recovery is not a reconstruction in the psychoanalytic sense of the term because the scene is taking place for the first time in the moment of occupying it as a scene; the unconscious fantasy finally assumes material form. The scenic element of the unconscious fantasy, consequently, may be understood as the form in which we recover/inhabit the unconscious fantasy—or even the only way in which an unconscious fantasy can be materially registered. Unconscious fantasy is thus the topological structure that enables and arranges the scene, and multiple scenic arrangements can express the same unconscious fantasy.

As a topological approach to the psyche shows us, events separated in space and time can psychically be understood as “the same” if certain relations are perceived to be replicated. For example, as we discuss elsewhere, Lacan’s topological analysis of the Rat Man case shows how an obsessional neurotic locates his own lovers and colleagues in the places marked out by *his father’s* pre-marital story of love, debt, and friendship – a girl at the post office represents the poor but pretty woman his father did not marry, a Lieutenant to whom the Rat Man appears to owe money occupies the place of this father’s debtor, etc. (Blum and Secor 2011; Lacan 1979).

In his 1930 work, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud compared the archeology of the unconscious to that of the city of Rome: “Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychic entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development

continue to exist alongside the latest one” (Freud 1930, p. 70). As far as the unconscious is concerned, all phases of development co-exist on the same psychic space. Therefore, a topological approach is more explanatory for understanding the origins of trauma than one that takes the fixed coordinates of a topographical understanding of space as its basis.

Unconscious Fantasy and Psychic Space

Unconscious fantasy is the very structure of the inseparability of psychic and material space, and yet space has rarely been acknowledged as constitutive of unconscious fantasy. To explore what happens when the constitutive role of space is elided, we turn to Arlow’s influential essay on unconscious fantasy. Arlow uses two significant examples in this essay: a case of claustrophobia that arises in a subway, and his widely-cited analogy of the dual projectors.² We will juxtapose these two examples in order to show that while the first example (claustrophobia) provides a rich account of how unconscious fantasy is structured at the intersection of psychic and material space, the second example of unconscious fantasy (the dual projectors) loses analytic leverage by flattening space to the slim interface of the screen. From our perspective, Arlow’s example of the twin who falls ill in the subway demonstrates that it is the topological convergence of the essential coordinates of unconscious fantasy that erupts in trauma.

² A recurrent example of the determining role of unconscious fantasy is claustrophobia. Claustrophobia is a symptom, linked to unconscious fantasies of intrauterine life, that is spatial by nature. It is in the claustrum that the unconscious fantasy is ignited and thus culminates in a phobic response. We are not saying that it is spatial because the patients are literally recalling the intrauterine experience; rather, we are saying that the origin of trauma has an overriding spatiality. See Fenichel 1944; Lewin 1935; Gehi 1973; Weiss, 1935. Many of Arlow’s patients suffer from claustrophobia (1963;1969b; 1972; 1996).

“Ten years before the onset of his illness, his twin brother, whom the patient had momentarily abandoned, collapsed in a train and subsequently died. The patient held himself responsible for his brother’s death. Years later, a week before the onset of his illness, the patient was in the unhappy position of having to decide whether to take his uncle to the hospital or to risk having him treated at home. The patient decided to take the uncle to the hospital, but the latter died in the ambulance before they reached their destination. The patient grieved, but did not develop claustrophobic symptoms until several days later *when he was traveling in a subway in the company of a group of sibling figures*. The analysis demonstrated that this symptom was connected with unconscious fantasies concerning his twin brother and the interior of the body. In these fantasies, the patient would imagine himself inside the mother’s body with or without his twin. On other occasions, the fantasy concerned the activities of the brother within the patient’s body” (1969b, pp.16-17).

The elements of the patient’s experience overlapped with an unconscious fantasy of a primary struggle taking place in the interior of a body (his own or his mother’s). The fight to the death in the mother’s body seemed agonizingly played out in real life when he feels himself to be responsible for two deaths (his brother’s and his uncle’s). But it is not until he enters the subway, where the pieces of his unconscious fantasy combine, that he falls ill. Here, the coordinates of the fantasy are all operative: the underground space of the subway; the “sibling figures.” The subway substitutes for the mother’s body, which was and remains the scene of his primal struggle. Because of how topological space folds past and present together in a single scene, in much the same way that any store for Emma becomes “the store,” the subway *is* the mother’s

body. This effect of equivalence, what Arlow describes as “the consonance between the realistic situation and the specific, unconscious fantasy which it reactivates,” can happen, we argue, because unconscious fantasy is topological and thus can render identical otherwise disparate times and places by mapping them according to the same relational constellation (1969b, p. 16). It is the topologically structured scene of unconscious fantasy to which Emma fears returning, and where the twin falls ill.

Compare this story of the subway, then, to Arlow’s fiction of the dual projectors where he strangely collapses the constitutive role of space in the prior example:

The contribution that unconscious fantasy makes to conscious experience may be expressed illustratively through the use of a visual model. The idea for such a model occurred to me several years ago. It was after Thanksgiving dinner and a friend had brought a movie projector to show the children some animated cartoons. Since we did not have a regulation type movie screen, we used a translucent white window shade instead. During the showing of the cartoons, I had occasion to go outdoors. To my amusement, I noted that I could watch the animated cartoons through the window on the obverse side of the window shade. It occurred to me that an interesting effect could be obtained if another movie projector were used to flash another set of images from the opposite side of the screen. If the second set of images were of equal intensity to the first and had a totally unrelated content, the effect of fusing the two images would, of course, be chaotic. On the other hand, however, if the material and the essential characters which were being projected from the outside and the inside were appropriately synchronized according to time and content, all sorts of final effects could be achieved, depending upon the relative intensity of the contribution from the two

sources. (Arlow 1969b, pp. 23-24).

Like Emma's store and the twin's subway, inner and outer projectors, psychic and material realities, merge in a single scene. But this space of convergence for Arlow is near insubstantial, a screen that is no more than a membrane, a passive non-place of projection. It seems that Arlow reduces space in all its complex multidimensionality to a screen so that he can sustain a distinction between material and psychic realities, the two projectors and their images. It is only when space becomes inoperative, in other words, that such a distinction is meaningful.

We argue that space is more than simply where images from material reality and psychic reality line up, a background or an empty surface. Once we replace psychic reality with psychic **space**, our point becomes sharper. Let us return to the subway. From the perspective of psychic vs. material reality, there is the real subway in contrast to the subway experienced **as if** it's the interior of the body. But when we reflect on the sequence of psychic events that leads to the patient's falling ill, there is no subway separable from the mother's body; psychic space is inhabited. Arlow reads the subway as a metaphor for the mother's body whereas we are arguing that topologically speaking, it *is* the mother's body. Like the coffee cup and the donut, they are qualitatively identical. At the same time, the mother's body is retroactively imagined, thus it's no more a ground than the subway—they are both simply enclosures. Imagine the dual projectors producing not two-dimensional overlapping images that can ultimately be separated (the thin membrane of the screen marking their exteriority) but rather *a room*, an inhabitable scene, that is in a sense created by the inseparability of material and psychic realities/spaces. Moreover, in contrast to the external analyst on the side of material reality observing the play of images, there is no external perspective;

the room must be inhabited by the analyst as well. To be in the room is to be in the confluence of material and psychic space, from which there is no external vantage point.³

Arlow's two projectors present a flattened, two-dimensional spatiality in a marked reversal of what he seems to have instinctively recognized in the subway example. Entering the subway repeats not only a material situation (enclosure) but a psychic constellation to which the patient has become fixated that is inseparable from the spatial structure of enclosure itself. Lacan used a series of topological figures to illustrate phenomena of fixation and the repetition compulsion. These figures allowed Lacan to express the Moebius-like relationships (wherein exteriority and interiority twist and turn into one another) that produce the neurotic subject. In "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," his analysis of the "Rat Man" case, Lacan writes: "Everything happens as if the impasses inherent in the original situation moved to another point in the mythic network, as if what was not resolved here always turned up over there" (1979, p. 415). For the claustrophobic as for Emma, the fixation is to a set of relationships that cannot be abstracted from their topological (material and psychic) arrangement. Put simply, there is no psychic space that is not constituted by material space, and vice versa.

Arlow's projector analogy reduces space to an insubstantial screen (in a later essay he calls it "translucent") with no material or psychic contribution of its own, to a

³ As Moss (2008, pp. 63-64) notes, Arlow positions the analyst on the outside looking in, not only able to recognize the combination of projections but also to clearly distinguish between the real external perceptions and the psychic projection. Allied with the "outdoors," as Moss observes, the analyst feels able to differentiate material from psychic realities. As Jacques Derrida would say, however, "il n'y pas de hors-texte," there is no outside or meta-position for the analyst whose apparent "outside" is nevertheless simply one location among many (ultimately inside the room as well) and no more tied to a universal view than any other location.

mere surface for the projections that animate it. But in fact the screen is a place; the projections require such a location for their very appearance. It is worth in this context referring to Freud's early account of screen memories where we can see that such memories are tied to specific places. The screen, in other words, on which the transplanted memory unfolds, functions as a three-dimensional location. Freud's famous autobiographical example concerns a memory recalled at seventeen years of age on the occasion of visiting his childhood home.⁴ "The scene appears to me fairly indifferent and I cannot understand why it should have become fixed in my memory. Let me describe it to you. I see a rectangular, rather steeply sloping piece of meadow-land, green and thickly grown; in the green there are a great number of yellow flowers—evidently common dandelions. At the top end of the meadow there is a cottage and in front of the cottage door two women are standing chatting busily, a peasant-woman with a handkerchief on her head and a children's nurse. Three children are playing in the grass. One of them is myself (between the age of two and three); the two others are my boy cousin, who is a year older than me, and his sister, who is almost exactly the same age as I am." (1899, p. 311). In place of his unconscious lustful fantasies directed at his host's daughter Freud interposed a childhood memory of sporting with cousins and stealing the girl cousin's flowers (an allusion to deflowering). Freud explains that he "returned for the first time to my birthplace for the holidays," and thus the precipitating *psychic event* is spatial, inaugurated by the return to his birthplace (p. 312). His current but repressed fantasy of deflowering his host's daughter is reassigned to an earlier, ostensibly more innocent scene, which defends against his sexual fantasy. The

⁴ In fact, Freud was sixteen at the time, but the change in age is among the "disguises" of the personal story.

unconscious fantasy is triggered, in other words, by this particular location, which is precisely what enables the repetition, or put differently, the topological reiteration of the central coordinates.⁵ Thus, Freud's "screen" is a place; it is at once material and psychic. Freud occupies the point of intersection of the two registers which produces a fantasy (or, conversely, the fantasy occasions the intersection) that traverses material and psychic domains, thereby rendering them inseparable, in contrast to Arlow's window shade or translucent film screen that neatly demarcates the inside from the outside. Ernest Jones points out that Freud energetically disguised the autobiographical elements of this story even though the events hardly seem to justify his secretiveness.⁶ In retracing Freud's associations and ultimately linking them to the mother, Jones concludes that the memory "contained both halves of the Oedipus complex" (1972, p. 28). Of course the mother is also, literally, the "birthplace" and, like Arlow's example of the subway, place in this instance does not simply stand for the mother but rather psychically reconstitutes her. Place is indeed the supervening factor in the memory; the origin of the screen memory is the story of origins. While Freud described the displacements of screen memories as the substitution of one psychic content for another (associated) content, in this instance we can see that more important for Freud was likely the substitution of one place (of birth) for another.⁷ It is therefore this intersection

⁵ The screen memory is like trauma, a vehicle for the intersection of psychic and material space, and its incremental distortions are such that it can become impossible to dis sever the two spatial registers. Greenacre (1950) gives an example of a patient who recalls a primal scene experience when she was nine, a strikingly temperate memory shot through with elements from multiple traumatic scenes from her childhood.

⁶ "It is therefore plain that Freud regarded the story in the screen memory, or rather the deep personal feelings connected with it, as something specially intimate, though the grounds for this are far from evident to anyone else" (Jones 1972, p. 28).

⁷ Discussing at length the scenic structure of seduction, whether it's the child's seduction of or by the adult, Laplanche identifies the mother's seduction of the child as the

of scenes, scenes that all serve to dramatize the constitutive effects of psychic space, that creates psychic meaning and effects. As in the case of the deferred action of trauma, more than one scene is required for screen memories; yet, topologically they function as the *same place*. Unconscious fantasy encounters the material world in the form of psychic space.

Primal Scenes and *Blow-Up*

Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* features the structure of screen memory around a delayed trauma whose truth unravels when material space (photographing an illicit couple) is reworked by psychic space.⁸ Although Arlow has described this film more than once as demonstrating the dangers of privileging psychic over material reality, we will argue conversely that Antonioni rejects the priority of the reality principle along with any naïve confidence in evidence uninfluenced by fantasy. We will also discuss how the film's primal scene motif disrupts rather than confirms the primal scene as a material origin of trauma. Throughout, our argument depends on the film's brilliant articulation of psychic space as a category that defeats the real/fantasy binary.

In "Fantasy, Memory, and Reality Testing," Arlow interprets *Blow-Up* as exemplifying the need to distinguish between false and true memory (or historical truth).

original/primal "scene"(1976, p. 33). From that perspective we can reconsider Freud's screen memory as a series of seduction scenes, all leading back to the maternal seduction.

⁸ Melvin Goldstein (1975) sees *Blow-Up* as a screen memory par excellence but leaves out the locatedness of such memories and it is precisely these spatial elements of the screen memory to which we wish to call attention.

He concludes: “ Thus the hero in *Blow-Up* becomes a kind of twentieth century Everyman traumatized in childhood. He has lost his connection with his past and has, in his hand, only the fragment of the experience, a fragment out of context, enlarged to the point of unreality. Is it memory or fantasy? Without confirmatory evidence he begins to doubt his own reality. Only through psychoanalysis can the picture be restored and the individual be reintegrated with his past. In this way he comes to appreciate the connection between fantasy, memory, and reality” (1969a, pp. 49-50). While Arlow understands the film to be exploring the negative consequences of the disjuncture, we take the film to mean quite the opposite and our analysis is based on the way in which the filmmaker plays with the relationship between psychic and material space. Indeed, Antonioni’s film suggests that psychic reality is always dramatized and experienced spatially, as psychic space. Not only is the material world organized by way of psychical reality, psychic space *is* the convergence of the material world with psychic reality.

The photographer protagonist of the film, a sort of David Bailey high-fashion/high-art type, takes a photograph in a park of what he presumes to be an illicit affair between a beautiful young woman and an older man. He is wantonly voyeuristic as he spies on the couple and is indifferent to their desire for privacy. The woman catches him photographing them and pleads with the photographer for the roll of film (the viewer assumes that she wants to suppress the record of her affair with the older, likely married, man) but he refuses. Later, when he develops his photographs, much like the psychoanalytic process, the photographer endeavors to reconstruct the sequence of events. Eventually, he learns that he witnessed not a secret romance but a murder. After all but one of the photographs are stolen from his studio and he’s left with a single blow-up of a corpse enlarged to such abstraction that it provides no discernible

evidence, the photographer returns to the scene in an attempt at conclusive proof. By the end of the film, the photographer possesses no evidence of having witnessed anything at all, neither a love affair nor a murder.

The photographer's psychic journey is to give up control of both his camera and the material space he imagines it dominates. He begins the film as a superficial and grandiose fashion photographer. He indifferently enters and exits impoverished spaces that for him are merely photo-ops for his "serious" art book, and leave him emotionally and even imaginatively unscathed. It is because of his limited insight that the photographer can confidently declare to his publisher that the scenes in the park he shot that morning, scenes ultimately recording a murder, are "peaceful."

In contrast to the vapid models that surround him, the woman in the park seems indecipherable. He concedes her "subjectivity" to the extent that she has motivations and desires that he cannot grasp on a beautiful photographic surface. Her mystery, her subjectivity, her unfathomable desire, lure the photographer into an unfamiliar sense of himself in the world. He is now inside the drama instead of external to events that previously all seemed interchangeable (high fashion models, homes for destitute men, war zones). It is the woman's gaze (she is, crucially, a femme fatale figure) that alerts him to something happening off-camera. Where is she looking? This is what he tries locate. As well, when the woman first enters his studio in pursuit of the film, she seems to be staring at something off-camera, but we never glimpse the reverse shot of her eyeline. Like the photographer, the viewer is invited to fasten onto the trajectory of the woman's eyeline, an eyeline linked to the unconscious inasmuch as we are tracking her object of desire in another (off-camera, e.g. repressed) scene. Crucially, then, the

unconscious (the off-camera trajectory of her eyeline) is construed as a place, and a topological one at that.

At first, the photographer attempts to map topographically her gaze in the park through a series of blow-ups. Chasing the woman's eyeline, he draws a square around what seems to be merely grass and a fence behind which are bushes—and then, nothing? He presses the scene to give up its secrets, as though the photo is itself the “place” that stands in for its material referent. Although he believes that his topographical method can solve the mystery, can reveal the truth lurking beneath appearances, this mysterious 'place' that he boxes off with that white square is in fact a psychic space and therefore topological.

Freud writes of screen memory that “It is a case of displacement on to something associated by continuity; or, looking at the process as a whole, a case of repression accompanied by the substitution of something in the neighbourhood (whether in space or time)” (1899, pp. 307-308). Analogously, the photographer has shot what turns out to be the most inessential aspects of the scene, two lovers, nevertheless adjacent to the (central) crime scene. It is through the photograph that the photographer has access to a crime that he witnessed but didn't understand at the time, which is the very definition of the primal scene—understood only retroactively. Only his camera can register the murder (the operations of the unconscious), the full parameters of the otherwise uneventful scene, as though the photographs activate a second scene--like Emma's trip to the store where the young men seem to laugh at her or the Wolf Man's fusing the primal scene with the image of his nursemaid scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees (Freud 1918, p. 91). In each instance, understanding is deferred, unfolding in the context of a developmental stage.

The photographer's return to the park marks a convergence of the material and psychic spatialities—for the viewer as well inasmuch as we have to ask whether he is seeing an actual dead body or an illusion. There is something about the body itself, aglow in the dark grass, that has the brightened luminescent quality of a screen memory (like screen memories, the body is seen “*too* clearly” [Freud 1899, p. 305]). Not only are we unable to determine whether the body is real or not, we also don't know whether or not a crime took place—and we never will. Rather, the point is the twisting of psychic and material realities, and the way their inseparability is inscribed spatially. Antonioni speculates: “One day, he photographs two people in a park, an element of reality that appears real. And it is. But reality has a quality of freedom about it that is hard to explain. This film, perhaps is like Zen; the moment you explain it, you betray it. I mean, a film you can explain in words, is not a real film” (Cardullo 1971, p. 54). The refusal of either/or is captured in the scene when, toward the end of the film, the photographer recognizes the woman from the park standing outside a shop window. He leaps from his car to follow her but she seemingly disappears into the crowd.⁹ We might ask whether he actually saw her or just imagined her, but she is in fact simultaneously real and imaginary, in the scene and suddenly gone. For the viewer, the filmic space she inhabits, like that of the corpse, is rendered psychic the moment we question its reality.

By the end of the film, the photographer is entirely in the grip of psychic reality as conveyed by his auditory hallucination of the tennis ball. In an interview, Antonioni

⁹ Crucially, the woman in the park is “disappeared” from the screen in a foreshadowing of what will happen to the photographer at the end. When one views the film frame by frame, it is clear that rather than disappearing into the crowd, the woman literally disappears; in one frame she is there, while in the following she is not.

insisted that his ending was optimistic: “[T]he photographer has understood a lot of things, including how to play with in [sic] imaginary ball—which is quite an achievement” (Cardullo 1971, p. 55). Here Antonioni is calling attention to the photographer’s liberation from the distinction between fantasy and reality that hitherto has so preoccupied him. Material reality succumbs to psychic reality and it is psychic space (represented by the grass) that prevails in the closing shots of the film. The mimes are in a sense both the photographer’s and the viewer’s guides through this process of unfettering ourselves from the constraints of the real. Ultimately, the film urges emancipation (“to be free,” to quote the photographer’s expressed desire) from the domination of the reality principle and the conflict it induces between a notion of material truth and unconscious fantasy.

It is telling that the film’s repudiation of the primacy of material reality is precisely what Arlow disavows.¹⁰ Arlow argues that the film circles around the photographer’s unconscious fantasy of the primal scene. He witnesses the illicit relation between the woman in the park and the man she sets up, walks in on his artist friend and his wife making love, and even encounters a relationship (masked by a lie) between his publisher and the model, Verushka.¹¹ As a consequence of his psychologically

¹⁰ In Arlow’s 1996 essay, “The Concept of Psychic Reality—How Useful?” his resistance to a commonly held understanding of psychic reality seems to derive from his own narrow definition that sustains the primacy of an “objective reality”: “It is not a fantasy that this taken for the real truth, for an actual event, but the recollection of a *psychic* event with its mixture of fact and fantasy. During analytic work, it becomes the responsibility of the therapist to undo the defensive distortions which have been imposed upon the material offered as memory and to recognize in the patient’s productions a kernel of what really happened. This is not the same as ‘objective reality’, which can be observed by outsiders and validated consensually” (p. 663). Interestingly, this article features yet another claustrophobic patient whose object relations are all decidedly spatial.

¹¹ Yet, the sex scene between Bill and Patricia is a reversal of the child’s primal scene fantasy because the woman/mother makes it clear that she would prefer her lover to be the photographer/child witness. Indeed, in the published screenplay, we learn that Patricia’s orgasm is the result of imagining the photographer in place of her husband.

“universal” reading, Arlow asserts the following: “Antonioni has transcended the temporal limitations of London and the mod scene and has given aesthetic elaboration and symbolic expression to a universal psychological theme, the fantasies and effects of the primal-scene experience” (1980, p. 535). Much like his elision of the screen on which the projections of unconscious fantasy and reality converge, Arlow undervalues the scenic element of *Blow-Up*’s primal scene.

In psychoanalytic theory, the primal scene is always at the juncture of construction and reconstruction inasmuch as the question arises: did the child truly witness the primal scene?¹² Or is the primal scene largely the effect of a retrospective reconstruction, what is imagined about the parents after the child learns the facts of life? In other words, the primal scene is ideally suited to figure at the intersection of psychic and material space. Where, we might ask, does the scene unfold—in the real parental bedroom or in the child’s fantasy life? As Harold Blum puts it: “The anxiety, excitement, and guilt are elaborated in fantasy, and these fantasies themselves may be disguised and acquire new meanings during the course of development. Thus, the primal scene itself may become incorporated into a later screen memory; or the primal scene may *be* a screen memory. The differentiation of fantasy and reality becomes a complicated issue” (36).¹³

These shifts in the location of each actor are succinctly explained by Laplanche and Pontalis when they observe that the fantasizing subject can occupy any role in the sentence “The father seduces the daughter” as long as the basic scene remains intact (1968, p. 14). Topologically, the role played by the subject in the fantasy may shift, but the central coordinates of the Oedipally driven primal scene are fixed. Someone desires to eliminate someone in pursuit of someone else.

¹² See Freud 1937; Spence 1982.

¹³ Addressing both the seduction theory and the primal scene, Laplanche and Pontalis argue that it’s impossible to know whether fantasy gives rise to sexuality or vice versa (1968). Later (1989), Laplanche maintains that the “enigmatic signifier” of adult sexuality is always inevitably seducing the child with its incomprehensibility.

Freud himself questioned the material reality of the primal scene. In the case of the Wolf Man, Freud concedes the following: “I intend on this occasion to close the discussion of the reality of the primal scene with a *non liquet* [it is not clear]” (1918, p. 60) and “It is also a matter of indifference in this connection whether we choose to regard it as a primal *scene* or as a primal *phantasy*” (1918, p. 120n). And yet many analysts have been committed to locating the real event in space and time (e.g., Fenichel 1944; Greenacre 1950; Myers 1979). No wonder that a film like *Blow-Up* would prompt an intriguingly defensive reading (indeed, a reversal into the opposite) inasmuch as it asserts the primacy of psychic space. In his essay on the effects of primal scene exposure, Myers characterizes the relief experienced by patients to whom he offers a coherent framework for what otherwise felt “chaotic”: “In a general sense, the patients conveyed the idea that I was really listening to what they had to say and was able to integrate it for them in a manner which gave some sense of causality to the chaotic ideas and feelings they had experienced for much of their lives” (1979, p. 9). While Myers takes to be historically real such reconstructions, we cannot help but wonder if the primal scene narrative for these patients simply serves to harness otherwise unruly ideas and affects.

In the introduction to the Italian edition of his screenplays, Antonioni observes: “We know that under the image revealed there is another which is truer to reality and under this image still another and yet again still another under this last one, right down to the true image of that reality, absolute, mysterious, which no one will ever see or perhaps right down to the decomposition of any image, of any reality” (qtd. in Cardullo 1971, p. 90). Adultery or hidden love of any kind inevitably points to the “primal” betrayal by the parental couple, in a sense an image beneath the image. But there is also the

contributing Oedipal fantasy life of the child that is another image beneath the actuality of the parental sex life, and superadded to this image is the reprocessing of the primal scene fantasy through successive developmental phases.¹⁴ There is always a return, then, to an “original” memory, which nevertheless shape-shifts through developmental and experiential reiterations.¹⁵ Evelyn Schwaber dubbed this recollected and/or reanimated past of such repetitive phenomena as screen memories or the transference the “psychic past,” crucially differentiated from the historical past (1986, p. 912).

In his essay on the film, Arlow is as intent upon distinguishing between actual primal scene experiences and fantasy as the photographer is on capturing what “really” happened in the park. Arlow argues: “Also unresolved in the literature is the comparative effect of actually witnessing the primal scene as opposed to merely entertaining a fantasy about it. From the technical point of view, it is very striking that in most instances the patient does not recall the primal scene as such and the event has to be reconstructed from the unquestionable and compelling evidence gathered in the psychoanalytic situation. This is especially significant in those cases where the evidence clearly indicates that the patient had the opportunity to observe the primal scene not once but repeatedly over a period of many years” (1980, pp. 521-2). Arlow’s investment in “unquestionable and compelling evidence” reminds one of his conviction that in the

¹⁴ As Harold Blum writes: “and these fantasies themselves may be disguised and acquire new meanings during the course of development” (1979, p. 36).

¹⁵ Kerry Kelly Novick underscores the developmental shifts that alter the relationship between past and present, a facet of memory that Freud was addressing early on: “Lest we risk oversimplifying this issue, it is important to remind ourselves that we cannot be dealing with a direct correspondence between past and present. In 1896, Freud wrote to Fliess, ‘the psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances—to a retranscription ... memory is present not once but several times over’ (1990, pp. 342-3). See also Blum 1996.

end the photographer loses his hold on reality. Of the mimes, Arlow writes: “They are unreal, deceiving figures . . . who try to palm off illusion for reality, fantasy for memory, like the comforting, deceiving parents of the primal scene. At the invitation of the mimes, the photographer falls into their make-believe, and ultimately he too fades from reality. In this way the film attests to the gnawing doubt of the traumatized witness to the primal scene, a doubt that grows out of his being unable to recapture the essence of his own motivations, of the reality of his impressions, leading finally to alienation and depersonalization” (1980, p. 539). The “reality” from which the photographer ostensibly “fades” is the grassy scene of the park, a scene that the filmmaker has throughout marked as a psychic space. Moreover, Arlow’s analytic reconstructions of his patients’ primal scenes are identical to the photographer’s reconstruction of events in the park. In contrast to the photographer who transcends the fantasy/real binary by retrieving the tennis ball for the mimes to openly inhabit psychic space, Arlow hunts down the traces of primal scene exposure. About one patient, he writes: “From these associations we were able to establish that the patient had slept in the same room as his parents and had witnessed their intercourse while visiting his uncle in the neighboring city when he was four years old. Subsequently, he was able to confirm through independent sources that his brother and sister had been present but had been accommodated overnight at the home of other relatives. The details of the [patient’s] dream clearly established the time and place of the primal-scene event” (1980, p. 528). Arlow not only insists on the material reality of the scene, but goes so far as to use a dream (the production *par excellence* of the unconscious fantasy life) to tether various hints to an indisputable reality. It is in this effort to overcome fantasy life (the dream) by using it as a means to a material end (time and place), that Arlow reveals an anxiety that plagues psychoanalytic theory and practice regarding a clear distinction between material and psychic reality

(Schwaber 1986). Like the pre-liberated photographer, Arlow is wedded to a two-dimensional conception of reality, stranded on the surface of the screen, where the analyst's view from "outdoors" remains inviolate.

Paul Ricoeur discusses the difficulty psychic reality poses for psychoanalysis inasmuch as it is at once the foundation of psychoanalytic thinking and yet makes beside the point questions of material evidence or truth. Addressing Freud's 1917 discussion of material vs. psychic reality, Ricoeur writes: "Symptoms and fantasies 'abstract from the object and thus renounce every relation with external reality.' He then goes on to refer to infantile scenes which themselves 'are not always true.' This is an especially important admission when we remember how difficult it was for Freud to give up his initial hypothesis of the father's real seduction of the child. More than fifteen years later he remarked how disturbing this discovery remained for him. What is so disturbing about it? Precisely that it is not clinically relevant whether the infantile scenes are true or false. And it does not matter, therefore, from an epistemological point of view, either. This is what is expressed by the phrase 'psychical reality.'"(1977, p. 840).

The twin who falls ill in the subway isn't reinhabiting the womb he shared with his brother; rather, he's inhabiting the fantasy of sharing the womb, which would make fantasy itself the origin of a "scene." This primal or first event, however, is merely a reiteration of the coordinates of the unconscious fantasy that occasioned it. Consider Freud's screen memory where he recasts the fantasy of returning to the womb (birthplace) into a meadow from the town of his birth, or the serene heath of *Blow-Up* where a scene of illicit love transmogrifies retrospectively into a scene of murder. From this perspective, there is no original scene, as Laplanche suggests, but instead only a form in which unconscious fantasy seems materially accessible; such a form, the

“scene,” is then experienced as original and in that sense “inhabited.” The scene is the “room” created by unconscious fantasy. The primal scene may or may not have been inhabited topographically (the perspective of material reality), the child may never have been seduced by the parent; nevertheless, the scene is repeatedly inhabited topologically, (re)produced in *multiple* scenes that reiterate the same unconscious fantasy.

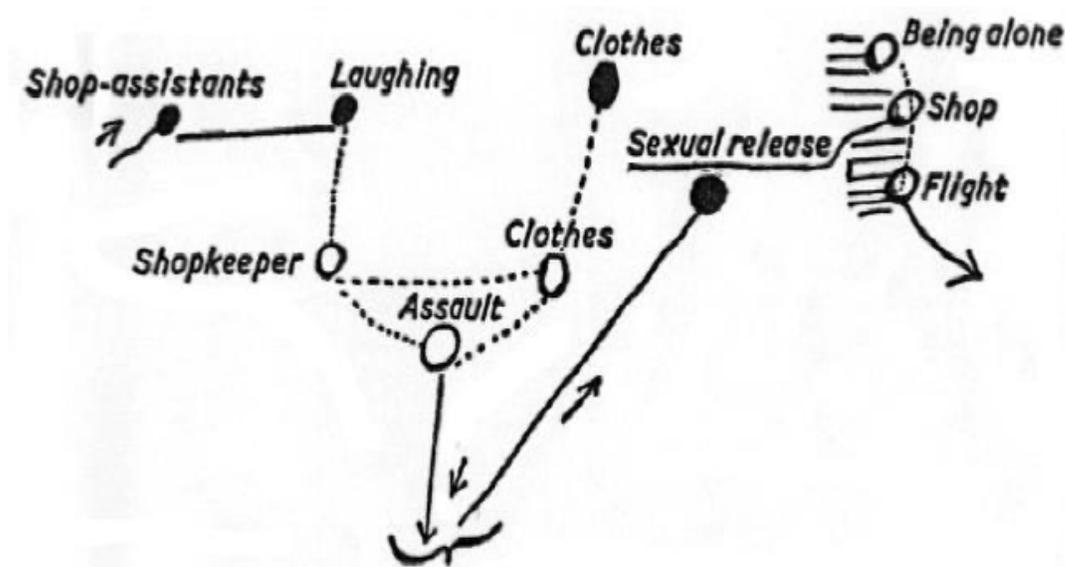
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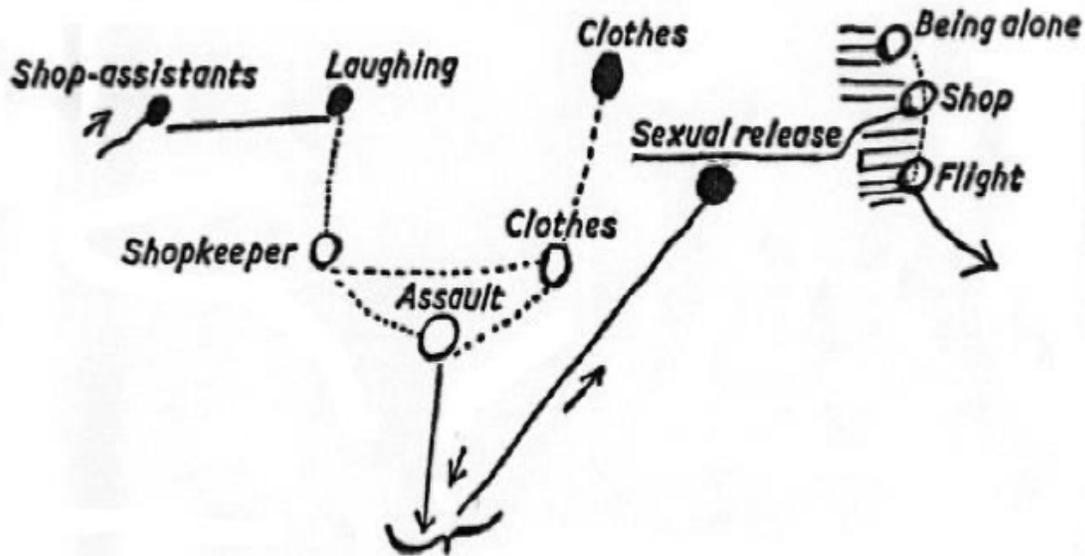
Our argument is that we always inhabit psychic space, the topological structure of unconscious fantasy, but it is only at certain moments, when topological space sharply diverges from topographical space, that we become aware of the gap. The dominance of psychic space precipitates trauma just as trauma activates the dominance of psychic space. For the subject of trauma, material and psychic space converge absolutely. The subway is the mother’s body; Emma is always returning to the scene of seduction in the store. It is in the recapitulation of the psychic event, however, that a reversal takes place: the primacy of topographical space is reasserted at the same time that psychic space is characterized as mere distortion. This is what Arlow’s dual projector analogy sets up; he imagines that we can preserve reality intact from unconscious fantasy in order to insist on the difference. Arlow contends that the unconscious fantasies projected internally should be made more congruent with the images provided by external reality. Yet this does not mean that in the end material space is (or even can be) more authentic for the subject. In fact, as Antonioni’s film demonstrates, a hyper-investment in material space, represented by the photographer’s defensive insistence on standing “outside the room” in Arlow’s terms, obsessed with “proof,” or radically

separated from the objects of his camera lens, is in itself a disavowal of his own absolute embeddedness in psychic space.

Figure 2

Freud (1895): Emma





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