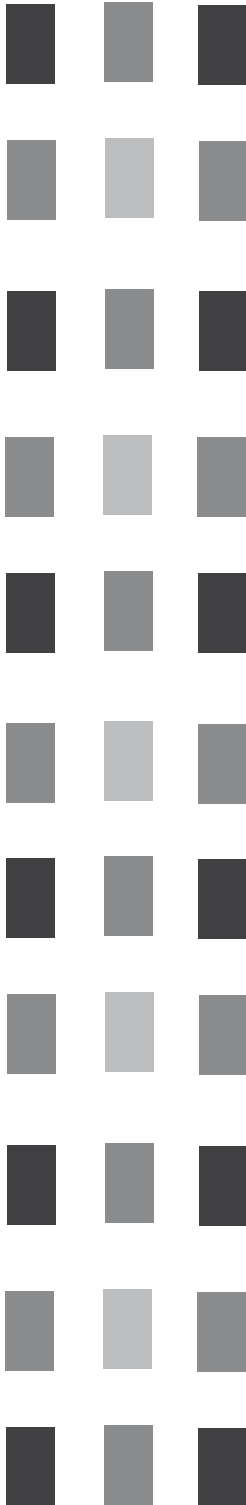


# Virtual Spaces, Virtual Subjects: Anxiety and Modernity

*Anthony Vidler*



Some months ago, when thinking of an appropriate talk to give tonight, we were not at war; certainly the tragedy of the World Trade Center was central to our concerns; certainly too, the competition for the rebuilding launched by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation was in its initial stages. But we were not, at least officially, at war. This evening, however, we think about architecture in another context, almost another world, from that which we thought had already been radically changed enough by September 11, 2001. And so it seems that any subject not directly concerned with the present crisis, with the violence and danger unleashed by this war, would be reduced to irrelevance, or at most a strange and disconnected incongruity. For what can we say here about architecture that has anything to do with such events? What does architecture, in any way, have to do with such events?

One answer to this question of course has become a truism in contemporary theory: all planning, all organization, in modern technological terms shares and is implicitly complicit in all realms of society, from war to peace, from the corporate to the military, from the political to the cultural. The organizational techniques, strategies, and means of analysis and synthesis, are bound together in a common culture of organization, and have been most especially since the Second World War: we daily reap the benefits of Turing's discoveries and Norbert Wiener's logic; the software we use, its potential for spatial and programmatic modeling, its animation effects, and its practical manufacturing uses, are all the products of research and development for war: historians such as Reinhold Martin, Manuel De Landa, and Beatriz Colomina have explored dimensions of these connections within what Martin has generically termed the "organizational complex."

But tonight I want to address another kind of complex: that which Freud and his 20th century heirs have termed anxiety. For in post-September 11 New York, we are, whether protestors, bystanders, or even as sympathetic supporters, bound in a common state of anxiety. Daily alerts – green, yellow, orange, and red, indicate the level of chatter that in turn points to a heightened probability of terrorist attack; advisories as futile as those which told us to duck under our school desks to avoid the dangers of nuclear attack cause runs on duck tape and surplus gas masks; helicopters hover with chemical and nuclear sensors around midtown Manhattan. Anxiety in this context can never be focused but it is always there. On entering the sub-way; in an elevator to a high floor; in a mall or department store; public and private space is invaded by this vague but tangible anxiety.

And so, while it surely does not seem to be the time to engage in debates "on the head of a pin"

around architectural aesthetics or even – its seems so long ago now – the issues raised by the recent competition for the WTC site, architecture and urban space participate, at home and on the battlefield in, the anxiety of war at every level. And such anxiety indeed has become a condition of modern life, if not the permanent condition of modernity. From the London of Conrad's *Secret Agent* to that of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* to the "blitz neuroses" identified by psychiatrists during the Second World War, to the horrors of London, Coventry, Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo, to the Paris of the Algerian war, to the Beirut of the civil war, the London of IRA explosions, and the daily horror in Palestine and Israel, the urban environment has been embedded, to use a recently fashionable term, in an ongoing war, and a more or less consistent state of anxiety. After September 11, the issue of "security" dominated discussions and proposals for reconstruction to the virtual exclusion of issues to do with the qualities of everyday life in cities that have been the province of planners since Team X's revolt against CIAM and Jane Jacobs' revolt against Robert Moses.

But the anxiety analyzed by Freud, while related to such ostensible reasons to be afraid, was of another kind than that provoked by threats of destruction or death: it is that low-grade anxiety, sometimes heightened into phobia, that is provoked by the space of life itself, an anxiety, no matter what its deep causes, nevertheless haunts our everyday life. In modern culture, this anxiety has been identified and studied by psychologists in the 19th century, and psychoanalysts in the 20th; in earlier centuries it has been the concern of religion and philosophy. It is that anxiety felt by Pascal in the 17th century – an anxiety in the face of the void, the immensity of universal space – and Freud and Lacan in the 20th century – an anxiety of identity and the ego in the face of complexes and neuroses. As I observed in my recent book *Warped Space*, modern architecture, from the late nineteenth century to the present has been construed as a resistance to, or compensation for, this anxiety, one which insofar as it is a spatial anxiety has never been far from the preoccupations of architects and their theoretical mentors.

If indeed anxiety is a spatial construct – and architecture (or rather modern architecture) as a long-drawn out experiment in its exploration – how might we get at this apparently intangible phenomenon, one that might seem, in its psychoanalytic formulation to bypass architecture, and space, altogether in search of more fundamental sexual etiologies? Certainly that was Freud's conclusion, as he relegated all the spatial phobias that had been identified by doctors in the late nineteenth century to the domain of sexual neuroses. But later analysts, from Jacques Lacan to Sami-Ali

and Felix Guattari, and philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, have proposed models of anxiety that are spatial, whether optically or topologically formulated. Space is, in these terms, not only the locus of anxiety, but its internal structure. Further, since each of these spatial models of anxiety in psychoanalysis is historically and culturally specific, each can be seen as the interpretant, so to speak, of its analogues in architectural form, while at the same time remaining as an important interpretative point of reference for modernism in general.

What then might be the structure of anxiety for modernism? It was Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst and follower of Freud who elaborated the theory between 1935 and 1962: Lacan, a friend of the Surrealists, of Andre Breton and especially of Salvador Dali, always associated his theories with those of art and expression, understanding art as one of many ways in which the unconscious might reveal itself. His first attempt at designating anxiety as a "space" was in an essay first written in 1936, and delivered at the international psychoanalytic conference at Marienbad, three years after Hitler's coup, and the year of the Berlin Olympic games – those games which were celebrated in "Triumph of the Will" and which Lacan visited after the conference. He entitled the lecture "The Mirror Stage" and proposed, following the Belgian psychologist Henri Wallon, that there could be observed a moment in the life of the infant – at around six months – when, like Narcissus in the pool, the child would see itself and recognize itself for the first time in a mirror. Waving its arms, but yet unable to walk – Lacan imagines the child held up in a baby-walker or *trotte-bébé* – the child for the first time "recognizes" itself. But "itself" is the problem and remains the problem for the rest of life. For the "self" that is recognized in the mirror is not a "self" but an image of self, a two-dimensional picture, reduced in size and reversed, and both silent and unable to register any of the interior sensations felt but not understood of the moving, gesticulating baby. A picture, for ever separated from the physical being that knows itself only through this image and that for ever will be trying to join itself up, to chase, to identify with its remote identity. A split identity and a vain quest. Forever the self will be seeking this image in the "other" and not finding it. Hence paranoia, neurosis, and most importantly schizophrenia, not as unnatural states but as constitutional to a divided self.

Here the space of anxiety will be both the space between the mirror and the image – the space that will never render up a collapse, a truly unifying closure – and also the space of the mirror reflection, reflecting as it does not only the image of the self, but also the image of the space in which the self sits, and behind and around that

self. Separated by this space from oneself one is deprived of any autonomy. Hence one's fear of the double, the spectral other, and the anxiety that what one sees in the mirror might not be oneself. Lacan links this anxiety to the idea of the uncanny, which Freud in a famous essay of 1919 defined as something which, "familiar" or homely, and long-repressed into the unconscious, suddenly returns and becomes "strangely familiar" or uncanny, literally *unheimlich* or "unhomely" in German.

Later, Lacan with theorized this mirror in another way – a mirror that both reveals and hides, and that in a famous optical experiment can be set up in order to produce an illusion. This is the experiment of Henri Boasse the geometer, where he demonstrates the properties of a concave mirror to provoke an illusion;

There is something you see in section and which is a mirror. A mirror does not extend to infinity, a mirror has its limits... (thus) one can see something in this mirror starting at a point situated, if one can say it, somewhere in the space of the mirror where it is not, for the subject, perceptible. Said in another way, I do not formally see my eye in the mirror, even if the mirror aids me in seeing something that I would not see otherwise. What I can say from this, is that the first thing to advance concerning this structure of anxiety... is that anxiety is framed.

Lacan went on to speak of the celebrated case, published by Freud, of the infantile neurosis of the so-called "Wolf-Man" so-called because of the dream he recounted where he saw in the uncanny light of the moon shining through his bedroom window, a pack of wolves seated on the branches of a tree, looking at him through the window. In this dream, the anxiety is framed, as pointed by the phrase in his account: "suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree... This "sudden opening" indicated for Lacan the process by which anxiety, once framed broke in on the subject's consciousness in a way that reflects the mirror fantasy in his diagram. This view, in which the viewer is viewed by the object of his view, is also the structure of the uncanny. Anxiety, then is framed through the mirror or its substitute, the window, and has something to do with a sudden revelation of what is not the subject, but that, precisely because it is not the subject's identity, causes anxiety.

Anxiety is something else. Anxiety, is when there appears in this frame that which was already there much closer to the house: *Heim*, the host/guest... In a certain sense, certainly, this unknown host/guest (*cet hôte inconnu*) which appears in so sudden a fashion has everything to do with what is found in the *Unheimlich*, but it is not enough only to designate it thus. Because, as the term indicates

... in French, this host/guest, in its ordinary sense, is already someone well worked over by waiting. (l'attente, expectation)

It is this rising up of the Heimlich in the frame which is the phenomenon of anxiety. And this is why it is false to say that anxiety is without object. Anxiety has another kind of object...

In architectural modernism, we can say that this anxiety has been framed in a number of different ways, each historically and culturally represented, but each corresponding to an attempt, as Manfredo Tafuri, put it, "to ward off anguish by understanding and absorbing its causes," and not only, as Tafuri holds, to ward off and absorb the shock of metropolis, but also the "shock" of individual anxiety, that precipitated by the understanding that identity, individual as well as collective, is, in modernity, subject to profound alienation.

Let us then try to trace the historical trajectory of this attempt, an attempt that explains the internalization of shock in the methods and formal procedures of the avant-garde, as well as the desire to absorb anxiety in spatial models that contain, or, in many cases, try to go beyond or resist anxiety in the first place.

And because the night is drawing on, and our eyes are growing dimmer, I will conclude my talk with what you may if you wish treat as an after-dinner story-time. I will draw out of Lacan's entirely modern mirror stage story, a fable of four mirror stages, giving myself the liberty to update Lacan, even as he found it useful to update Narcissus. In these four mirror stages, then, I will commit psychoanalytical heresy and treat of the "mirror stage" as if it might be relativized in successive historical contexts, such that each moment of modernism might be seen to constitute its own special kind of subject, each kind of mirror or screen constructing a subject special to itself. And to complete the heresy, I will imagine that our little baby sitting so contentedly before its mirror (content that is before it's driven into schizophrenia and madness by the sight of its own reflection), I will consider that this baby is an architect. And as every story has to have a name, we might call this story, the story of the "Archi-babes in the Mirror."

My first modern mirror stage would be set in late nineteenth century Vienna: our baby architect would be surely held in a prosthesis designed by Schreber the elder, father of Freud's Schreber, inventor of mechanical aids for child deportment, as terrifying as the writing machine in Kafka's *Penal Colony*. The mirror would be large, perhaps full-length, spotted, and framed ornately in gilt wood carved in the writhing shapes of pre-art-nouveau soft-porn nymphs and satyrs. The combination of the iron frame enclosing our baby designer, the shadow of nanny hovering in background, the animated eroticism of the mirror

frame (definitely not a Kantian parergon), would surely produce a subject ripe for Freud's couch, but it would also construct a specific type of alienating imago, one filled with vague neurasthenia, riven with the mutual anxieties of agoraphobia and claustrophobia, and doomed to live in jugenstijl interiors, themselves, to use Benjamin's terms, as sterile as the electric wiring twining around their coldly sexual decoration. The adult form of this baby's socialization would be perhaps that of Adolf Loos, living, like Kafka, in a Chinese- puzzle-land of little boxes, connected within other little boxes in endless series, each one for a specific purpose, each one of a different scale, each one orthopedic, as Lacan would say, of a totality differentiated by social function; each one incorporated into the next in a totalizing game of what Loos himself called three-dimensional chess: the game of the raumplan. Outside the puzzle, however, in the new public realm, our subject would be dressed, Max Weber-style, without charisma, grey overcoat, black tie, and homburg hat, ready for the office.

My second scene would be that of the original Lacanian subject in the 1930s: surrealist and modernist at the same time, a space of struggle that, as Benjamin put it, might somehow embrace both André Breton and Le Corbusier in a single glance, it order to epitomize an essential "modernity." Our child architect would be held up in its very French trotte-bébé, or baby walker; replacing nanny, a modern mother would now be at hand, her face perhaps merging with the outlines of the baby's own reflection, while the room would be white, of ambiguous spatial dimensions, and sparsely furnished. The mirror would hold the transparency of glass – both the glass house in which Breton dreamed, and that which Le Corbusier, or better, Mies van der Rohe, built. Its frame would be chrome, perhaps designed in a circular form by Eileen Grey, with a little enlarging glass extended from its center so that the "relief du stature" of the reflection would be distorted and reversed twice over, as if depicted by Braque, or maybe worse, Picasso. The socialized subject that developed from this baby, might itself be divided. On the one hand it would have the desires of a surrealist – of a Matta, with his dreams of a soft, womb-like house, or a Tzara, with nostalgic homesickness for the uncanny space of the womb-like cave. Kiesler would be a good example, never able to extricate himself from the interior of his endless house which was his exterior.

On the other hand, it would embody the modernist drive towards spatial power – those epitomized by Ayn Rand, who we might imagine crossed-dressed as Cary Grant in the role of Howard Roark, supremely confident of overcoming the insufferable alienation of tactile-phobic, anti-

city, anti-crowd, anti-woman, by a gesture towards the "über-architektur" of the skyscraper. The search for transparency, unity, and what Le Corbusier called happily "l'espace indicible," or "ineffable space" (something akin, one imagines to the space of de-realization experienced by Freud and Le Corbusier himself on the Acropolis) common to many architectural dreams of modernism, would here be related to the attempt of the alienated "I" to pass through, like Alice, the mirror itself, rather than assuming its armored reflectivity. The result would be a subject in which the "I" captates itself within the isolated and fortified "castle" of a glass tower at the center of a landscape that, in Lacan's vivid description, bears a unnerving relationship to the modernist "radiant city" in all its varied incarnations:

The formation of the I is symbolized in dreams by a fortress [un camp retranché], or a stadium – its inner area and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips [son pourtour de gravats et de marécages], dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way.

An image that conjures up those visions of Hilberseimer's .

The inhabitant of this city, as Lacan also notes, might also find its subjectivity, its I, in an existentialist alibi for the self, a kind of self-imprisonment in which psychoanalysis would find the origin of a socialization in a "concentrationnaire" form. Here there would be no differentiation between inside and outside; our baby would later grow up to build a glass house for itself in Connecticut, and remain trapped for the rest of its life between modernism and postmodernism.

My third baby is more tentative in its construction, and perhaps this is a natural result of our contemporary immersion in its processes and effects. It is a stage at once of refusal – a refusal of reflection, of transparency, of extension – and of resignation; resignation that the grand narratives of introjection and projection that characterized historicist and modernist space/time models no longer hold. It is a space of absolute self-consciousness of pre-history and post-history, as if the baby architect, now held firmly by a dedicated care-giver of any age and gender, knows all the tricks; is aware somehow, as the psychoanalyst Sami-Ali has proposed, that in looking at itself, and denied its desire to capture the face of the Mother, is committed to a split identity, not only as between imago and I, but as between two Imagos, so to speak, blurred and morphed into a distorted physiognomy that is far from transparent or clear, but rather opaque and translucent. It would be as if this subject was truly "lost in space", wan-

dering vaguely in a state of continuous psychasthenia, disguising itself as space in space, ready to be devoured by the very object of its fear. It would be, finally, that we were dealing with a subject whose Imago was screened and projected back to it, not as reflection, but as a TV screen. This, the subject of our third stage would be, then, something between an expressionist defending itself against the void by ever more contorted shapes and a hacker – in architectural terms would situate it somewhere in the space between, let us say, Frank Gehry and Greg Lynn.

My fourth, and last, baby is no longer tied to TV: it is a truly digital subject. It has already graduated from hours of Sesame Street and Telly-Tubbies to Play Station 2, one who at the age of 15 plays Socom: The us Navy Seals, intently counting up his kills and deaths while CNN plays the real war on his TV. The mirror now, would be digital, not analog, and subject to the endless morphing described by architects like Greg Lynn or Karl Chu. The subject's image in the mirror would no longer be reflected but scanned or digicammed into the picture. In an initial, historical, moment of digitization, one would imagine this image to be in black a white – a surveillance camera image; now we are more likely to be asked to assume a hyper-real, 3D image, or even a holographic laser gram. A screen like William Gibson's greyed-out, neuro-mantic, computer screen; in a matrix that is, where introjection and projection a merged in a timeless state of warped and intersecting planes: what Gibson calls "a 3D chessboard extending to infinity." A matrix where no image of the alienated self could be captured, where the subject if indeed it could be called one would be self-identified only in the mind, jacked in, as Gibson imagines, to the half-mental half software worlds of abandoned web sites and omnipotent IP controllers. I imagine that the socialized version of this subject would be found in a gaming arcade, playing Area 51 with a red plastic gun. Later, as architect, it will reproduce its own DNA in spatial terms, but now a space that can only be experienced through mental sensation, where the visual has, finally, been entirely absorbed into a supra-sensory synthesis of all five traditional senses, and, where, indeed, there is no need to stray very far from the digital instruments that induce the sensation of "architecture" – those embedded bio-chips that the monopoly called NanoSoft has made ubiquitous – and that allow us, the nomads of flow, to take our constructions, along with everyone else's, wherever we go.

Our fourth baby is, of course, an architect of blurring. It is concerned to put into question all the notions that architecture holds dear – of precise measurement, of precise location, of visual clarity, of high resolution – and turn them around with technology that exploits loss of position,



fuzzy logic, obscure vision, and low resolution. It wants to challenge our confidence in narrative, in defined movement, and especially our tenacious belief in time as an indicator of progress. In the history of modern paradigms that we have sketched, it sets itself up as the extreme case of the unknown in the face of so much we think is known. Of course, the dissolution of form into the blur is, on one level, fundamentally non- if not anti- architectural. It is, so to speak, the physical realization of what Bataille called the informe, not a different form, but something without any fixed form, unreducible, save in its smallest atomic structures, to any form. And yet, on another level it is architectonic to the extreme, joining together in a stroke, the constituent idea at the heart of the Kantian definition of architectonic, and the potential of materially experiencing, in space, that sublime whose essence is to be beyond experience.

For us then, the blur holds the status of the sudden apparition in the Wolf-Man's bedroom window; not framed in the traditional sense, but framed nevertheless by its status as an installation, a specific event. But as an event it holds more than paradigmatic meaning; for while it exists and is experienced it functions as a kind of machine to momentarily construct us according to its own codes of identity. We are, immersed in the Blur, for a moment, different subjects; subjects thrown into a conscious three-dimensional enactment of screen subjectivity. It is as if, in the droplets of the cloud, we are ourselves pixilated, transformed into digital subjects, with all the spacelessness that that implies.

For, and this is my final point this evening, the digital world, despite all the attempts we make to bend it to our spatial will, is, in itself, not spatial at all: represented on a two dimensional screen, or through three-dimensional holograph simulation, but in its essence it is a code, an infinite string – a vector if you like – without internal coordinates of space as we have known it, conceptually at least,

over the last century or so. What this might mean for architecture has hardly yet been explored: we have been far too taken with the digital domesticated as a mere tool – emulating or simulating what we understand as perspectival reality, whether in flight training or in three-d iteration. This is simply the application of the digital to convention. What a nanotecture might be is a matter of pure speculation – of the kind that in the old days we might have called utopia. But utopia, after all, has always been the most radical form of critique of the present, and if we believe the present demands such critique, then perhaps utopia is what we need just now. I believe that we have glimpsed a little corner of that utopia in the fog of the blur. It is a utopia that returns us from the visual to the haptic, a utopia in which we might, as Benjamin wished, be lost for a moment, safe from the tyranny of the spectacle, and immersed in a world of porosity and touch, of hearing and smell, of our bodies and those of others – a truly social utopia that construes the other not as a typical physiognomy, but as an unknown being to be encountered and potentially discovered. Of course, it may equally turn out to be a terrible dystopia, a field for unbounded anxiety and blind slaughter, of the kind intimated in the newly released Doom III. But in a world where the grand visions of architecture as savior and reformer have been discredited, I will stand by those little events that hold promise before I discard them into Microsoft's trash can and let the testimony of my ten year old child stand as evidence that the Blur, whatever its faults was, as he said with tears of excitement in his eyes, a truly "humungous" experience; "I mean," he concluded, "You can make a building out of concrete and glass – that's easy, but out of a cloud – that's magic!"

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