

Lacan's Graph of Desire

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For most English speakers, Lacan's Graph of Desire is first encountered in "*The subversion of the subject and the Dialectic of Desire the Freudian unconscious*" in *Ecrits* (1966). Though "The subversion of the subject" was delivered in 1960, the Graph was first introduced in 1957 in *Seminar V*, and was extensively elaborated upon throughout the courses of *Seminars V* and *VI*. Official publications of these *Seminars* are unavailable in English, as of yet, and the unofficial versions of these *Seminars* contain discrepancies that may or may not help to elucidate the complex functions of the Graph – which makes the deciphering and understanding of this topology difficult, but not impossible.

In "*The subversion of the subject*" Lacan uses a series of graphs, building from what he called the "Elementary Cell" with the intent to move from outlining the most basic functions of the graph, with each successive model increasing in complexity until we finally arrive at the Complete Graph. He constructs it for us in this manner with the propaedeutic intention of making the Complete Graph more digestible, because it always already exists as a seeming whole. The Complete Graph is a topological representation of vectors, which participate in circuits which in fact become a series of systems that interact with one another. The synchronous systems in it are closed due to their temporal aspect, but in the diachronic moments and systems there comes into play a degree of openness and autopoiesis. Lacan states that the elements of the systems are inter-subjective and intra-subjective so that any given element can continuously participate in multiple systems at the same time. Further, and due to the individual synchronicities and comparative diachronies of these convergent systems, any given element can behave differently in any second system due to the determination of a first system, and vice versa. This way multiple systems can contribute to the gestalt properties of any given element. Though, naturally, any given element will not operate quite as it does in system one as it would in system

two, much like any chemical element will behave differently in the presence of a variety of other elements.

Elements

$s(\mathbf{A})$ is the locus of the “I” of the statement which is determined retroactively (*Seminar XI*, 139), and in this respect “is what may be called the punctuation, in which signification ends as a finished product” (*Écrits*, 806¹). Elsewhere Lacan refers to the $s(\mathbf{A})$ as the symptom.

\mathbf{A} is the locus of the Other, as the treasure trove of signifiers, or the “locus where the signifying battery is installed” inasmuch as this battery is not a complete set – since there is no real relationship between signs and things – yet despite this is still able to operate as if it were. Moreover, each individual’s signifying chains are so radically and uniquely specific to him that the limit of the Other for every person is complete within that person’s meaning system, but different from that of anyone else’s Other. Elsewhere in “*The subversion of the subject*” Lacan also refers to it as a “key position” in the Graph, as it is the “locus of speech” and “Truth’s witness” (*Écrits*, 806-08).

m is Lacan’s matheme for the *moi*, or the ego (a).

$i(a)$ ideal ego would refer to the *semblable*; body image or specular image, and in this capacity it becomes what the subject associates with to replace the lost phallus. (*Écrits*, 810, 816)

$\mathbf{I}(\mathbf{A})$ is the ego ideal, which are the unary traits on which consciousness is based (*Écrits*, 809).

$\mathbf{S}(\mathbf{A})$ is the closing point of an unconscious enunciation, and the location of the I in the enunciation of the unconscious (*Écrits*, 818). It is the representative or signifier of a lack in the Other, insofar as it reveals that there is a lack created by originary losses in the function of the Other as the treasure trove of signifiers. The \mathbf{A} tells us “that the Other himself is also marked by the signifier, that the Other is himself also abolished in a certain fashion in the discourse” (*Seminar VI*, 108). It is also the locus of the phallic signifier (...), Names-of-the-Father or the dead father in the Freudian myth. As the missing signifier in the complete battery of the Other it can be represented as -1 in the symbolic. “It is, as such, unpronounceable, but its operation is not, for the latter is what occurs whenever a proper name is

pronounced.” Lacan also designates it as $\sqrt{-1}$ (Écrits, 818-19, 823).

(S&D) is the formula of the drive or “what becomes of demand (D) when the subject vanishes from it.” Lacan also calls it the metaphorical counterpart for the treasure trove of signifiers. (Écrits, 817).

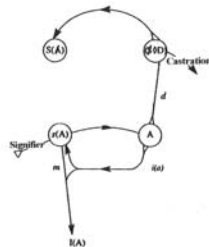
d is the locus of desire, which is the residual product of the subject’s need once it becomes reduced by demand.

(S◊a) is the formula for the fantasy and can be read as the relationship between the subject and the object of desire (*objet a*). Lacan says that what is expressed in this formula is the imaginary function of desire as “every possible object for man, poses for him the question of his subjective elision” in that “he himself cannot reach this object, as object, except in some way by finding himself as subject” or to “subsume himself” (*Seminar VI*, 105-6). It is also the closing point of the imaginary circuit (Écrits, 816).

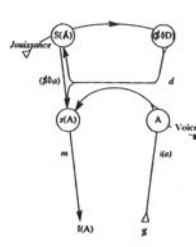
(A◊d) is the formula for the desire of the Other, and can be located on the graph at *d* in the position of desire. Though it is not used in “*The subversion of the subject*” Lacan does use this matheme in *Seminars V* and *VI*.

Systems

The graph has an S_1 side and an S_2 side. The S_1 side is the locus of the message, and on this side are all of the positions the subject *qua* subject may assume: outside the symbolic at $S(A)$, in the phantasy at $(S◊a)$, as the *I* of the statement at $s(A)$, as the ego at *m*, or as ego ideal at $I(A)$. On the S_2 side are the positions of the Other: as demand and in the drives at $(S◊D)$, in the Other’s desire at *d*, *qua* Other at A – and $\$$ repre-



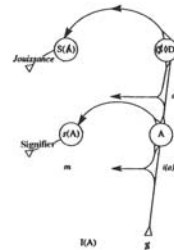
[Fig. 1]
Conscious



[Fig. 2]
Unconscious

sents the subject in the field of the Other.

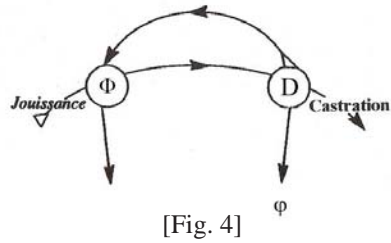
In *Seminar VI* Lacan states that there are two opposed systems operating within the Graph; that of the conscious [Fig. 1], and the unconscious [Fig. 2]. It should be noted that there is a degree of discrepancy as to how the conscious and unconscious systems are depicted in available copies of *Seminar VI*, as some vectors participate in both systems. Figures 1 and 2 are reproduced according to the graph as it is presented in the *Seminar* on November 12, 1958, and though these figures do not represent this, it should be noted that the *Voice* is part of the conscious statement and *Castration* is also part of the unconscious enunciation. One might add here Jacques-Alain Miller's recent statement that Lacan often denoted the symptom by $s(A)$, the matheme whose arrow aims at the voice. Each system operates according to its own temporality, and functions with a degree of autonomy with respect to the other, but can also influence the other and/or work together to produce the conscious statements and unconscious enunciations of the subject of the signifier. If we look at the graph in terms of its initial vectors, we come to notice the dominance of the Other in the graph, as we can see that nearly every initial vector originates from the S_2 side and moves back toward the S_1 [Fig. 3]. We can see in this graph the action of the field of the Other, the nodes A and $(S \diamond D)$ emanate towards or reach out to the S_1 side.



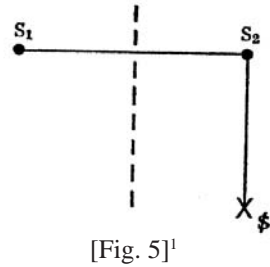
[Fig. 3]

Once the graph has been fully activated, its function is constant and relative to its own temporality, but initially there is a generative order to its activation. Beginning from the most animal state of *jouissance* the subject is first and foremost a subject of pure need and in order to have its needs fulfilled the nascent subject will encounter the necessity of succumbing to the demand of the Other in order to have its needs fulfilled. While the field of the Other is always there, the door before the Law is always open and waiting to receive those who come to approach it, should the doorman allow it. And like in Kafka's parable there are a series of doors, or thresholds that one must pass through in order to become a subject of the signifier. In the

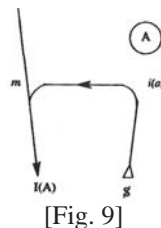
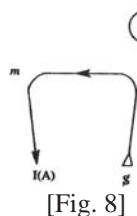
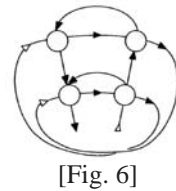
Urverdrängung [Fig. 4], we can locate the Law of the Names-of-the-Fathers, or Φ in the $S(A)$ node, and following this primal repression the *Spaltung* (splitting) of the subject occurs (Écrits 816).



In *Seminar VI* Lacan says that the top vector of the graph is the “foundation” of what will become the unconscious and what remains from this first encounter is the lost object $-\phi$ which is what the subject seeks to replace in the specular relationship. If we can assume that, already experiencing the first move from *Jouissance* to *Castration*, is the initial movement from the S_1 into the field of the Other on the S_2 side, the subject not only becomes a signifier but a signifier for another signifier which represent the barred subject [Fig. 5].



This allows us to formulate the subject as $\$$ and place him in the bottom right corner of the graph, as well as in the place of the *Signifier* on the left side of the graph. Eidelzstein proposes that the graph is the structure of the interior 8 [Fig. 6], so that the vector that ends at *Castration* loops back around to connect with the locus of the *Signifier* on the lower level of the graph (Eidelzstein 30-34).

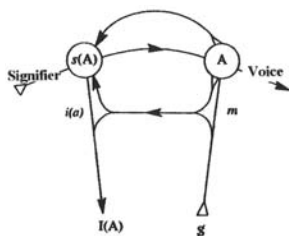


After this primal scene which leaves the nascent subject, the subject experiences its first castration, it attempts to reconnect with the Other or regain this lost object in the specular relationship. We come to the “intentionality of the subject... in so far as he has not become the speaking subject” which is represented by the vector $\$A$ [Fig. 7] in the circuit $\$.I(A)$. As this initial line of the circuit $\$.I(A)$ is short circuited by the vector $\rightarrow i(a).m$, the nascent subject discovers that “need must pass through the defiles of the signifier.” There is a re-routing that must take place in order for this subject of need to articulate itself to the Other (*Seminar VI*, 23). Instead of being able to become one with the Other (A), the subject then associates with the body image $i(a)$ that is donated to the subject from the Other (A) by the vector $A.s(A)$ which then becomes both template and support for the ego (m), and here the specular image $i(a)$ becomes what the subject associates and integrates with in order to compensate for the loss of the phallic signifier. The vector $\rightarrow i(a).m$ then feeds back down toward the production of the “first identification that forms the ego ideal” (*Écrits*, 808) through the path $\$.i(a).m.I(A)$ [Fig. 8].

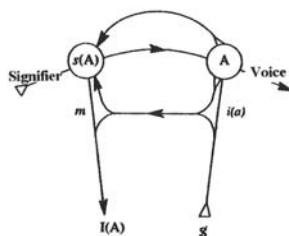
Seemingly paradoxical to the progression of the circuit, this primary formation of the ego ideal $I(A)$ is actually needed to help the subject form its ego, though if we remember that the upper portion of the graph is already functioning – and specifically the prohibition imposed by the Law of the Names-of-the-Fathers – we can understand that the locus of the $I(A)$ has already been pre-determined [Fig. 9]. This vector $\rightarrow S(\mathbb{A}).I(A)$ then becomes something of an anchor point which will help the ego situate itself on the S_1 side of the graph. As the ego is established we enter into the system of consciousness, and the non-speaking infant soon becomes able to differentiate between its own body and the bodies of other *semblables*. Though this first attempt to re-connect with the other fails, and the subject finds himself to be still lacking, he or she can also begin to grasp how to try to address this lack in/to the Other.

Here we should take a moment to notice the intentional error that Lacan puts into the version of the graph presented in “*The subversion of the subject.*” In the *Seminars* the matheme for the ideal ego $i(a)$ is on the left side of the graph [Fig. 10]

while in “*The subversion of the subject*” it appears on the right [Fig. 11]. In *Seminar VI* Lacan states that he makes this inversion with the intent of showing the fundamental *méconnaissance* that occurs in the function of the mirror stage. So then the ego itself is donated and reinforced by the vector $A.i(a)$ and the subject does not recognize, but instead will blithely assume that the ego is an autonomous construction of the subject, and is only modeled on the body image and signifiers that are donated by the Other and others.

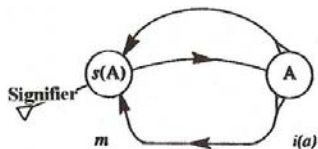


[Fig. 10]

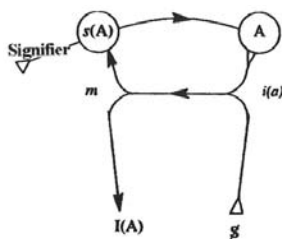


[Fig. 11]

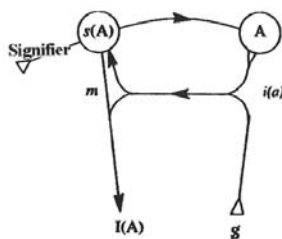
The vector $\rightarrow i(a).m$ is also used by the imaginary “return route” of the circuit of the subject’s submission to the signifier, which runs from $s(A)$ to A , and then back through the imaginary (lower) circuit through the vector $A.i(a).m.s(A)$ (Écrits, 806) [Fig. 12].



[Fig. 12]



[Fig. 13]

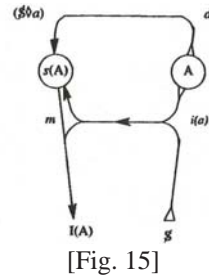


[Fig. 14]

Lacan states that this return route “shows that the ego is only completed by being articulated not as the I of discourse, but as metonymy of its signification” by a return route of the $A.s(A)$ vector (Écrits, 809). And so the $\rightarrow i(a).m$ vector feeds back into the $s(A)$ node [Fig. 13], which simultaneously helps to reinforce the symptom as well as the ego and the ego ideal

I(A) (through the ego) along the vector $\rightarrow s(A).m.I(A)$ [Fig. 14]. The ego is then the product of the convergence of several different sources, a composite of elements that have already been affected by the Other, if not directly donated by the Other.

If we consider the simultaneity of different vectors within the graph we might understand how other functions of the graph act in concert to produce the ego ideal as well as the position from where the subject must assert itself as the *I* of the statement or symptom: $s(A)$. Contemporaneous with the function of the mirror stage, the desire of the Other ($A \diamond d$) is already at work through the circuitry of the unconscious. Beginning with the Other (A), this vector runs through the loci of desire and then through the phantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) – which we could call the fantasy of the Other as articulated by others [Fig. 15]. Since this is an initial vector in the Complete Graph in “*The subversion of the subject*” we can surmise that this is the case; because even before the mirror stage the $s(A)$ node of the signified of the Other is already being conditioned by others as the subject is already being given the signifiers for being a “good boy/girl” or a “bad boy/girl.” So that when the child begins to speak, the defile that it must pass through is already prepared on the S_1 side.



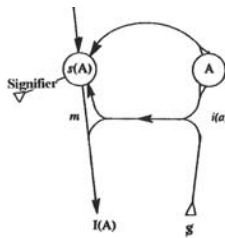
[Fig. 15]

When we consider the simultaneity of the graph we can also understand how the future-perfect vector $A.s(A)$, which is the symbolic return route of the circuit of the subject’s submission to the signifier, is already in play as well [Fig. 16]. As signification is already provided by the Other, they also help to shape the egos and condition the locus where the subject appears in the defiles of the signifier at $s(A)$ so that this node is already conditioned by the time the subject begins to produce statements. And the symptom has already entered the game even at this early moment.

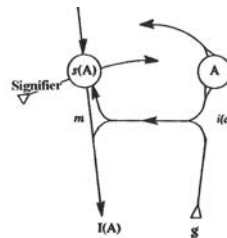
The node $s(A)$ is the most over-determined point on the graph, in that it is the point where the most vectors converge. It is the point from which the subject is able to articulate itself to the Other through language. In so far as the subject is in the process of acquiring the nuances of language, its entire aim is

to jump through this hoop, and in this respect the aim of the subject is to have its ego appear as the ego ideal in this position. The future perfect vector already confirms that this is not the case, and this is what the subject will come to find out once he or she begins to master language, that he or she is still lacking – unless, of course, he or she is a psychotic.

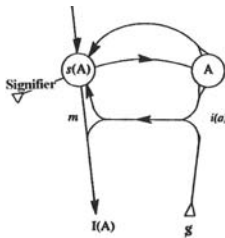
As the subject becomes able to articulate itself through spoken language, we come to what Lacan calls the “line of intentionality,” and this time of the speaking subject, represented by the line $\rightarrow \text{Signifier}.s(A).A$ [Fig. 18], which is the synchronic system of the statement in the vector $\rightarrow \text{Signifier.Voice}$ [Fig. 19] and along this vector we move from the S_1 side to the S_2 side. The diachronic function of the top vector $A.s(A)$, provides the future perfect signification of the I of the subject’s statement in a moment of retroactive resignification “insofar as a sentence



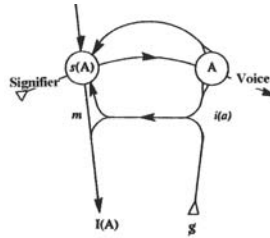
[Fig. 16]



[Fig. 17]



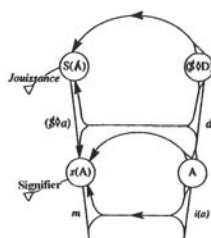
[Fig. 18]



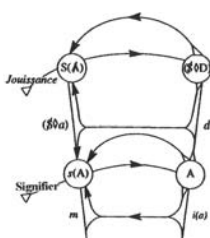
[Fig. 19]

closes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms and inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect” (Écrits, 805).

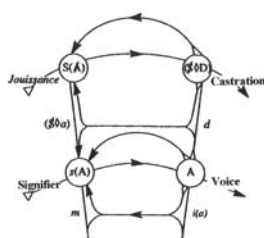
As the subject comes to produce the conscious statement, the unconscious enunciation is also made, and this is what is represented by the line that travels from *Jouissance* to *Castration* across the top of the graph in conjunction with the



[Fig. 20]



[Fig. 21]



[Fig. 22]

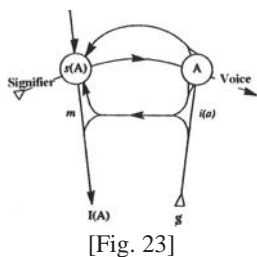
statement at the lower level, and it would be safe to say that statement and enunciation occur in a moment of synchronic simultaneity [Fig. 20-22].

As this subject gains the ability to articulate itself through the Other, and comes to produce its *Voice* it moves through the position $s(A)$, which is conditioned by input that moves not only through the locus of the ego, but which is also retroactively resignified from the locus of the other in the sense of the future perfect, which occurs simultaneously with the closing of the enunciation of the signifier as the punctuation of the statement that locates the *I* of the discourse in a valid position. But for this *I*, also the symptom, as validation in the field of the Other occurs, one's *Voice* emerges, and as it does so the subject can come to experience a renewal of *Jouissance*, hence the continuation of the vector from *Voice* to *Jouissance* can be supported (Eidelson 34).

As the subject becomes a speaking being, and as the unconscious becomes structured as such, the drives are installed in the S_2 position where initially the nascent subject encountered the demand of the Other. The result of the subject's encounter with the drives, however, does not change; as the subject's needs are fulfilled through the drives, the subject still experiences castration and there is still some part of the subject's demand that remains leftover or irreducible by the drives. Desire can now be articulated as that which remains when the drives fail to completely fulfill the need of the subject, usually reduced to the oral drive by Lacan. As the subject comes to realize this, and that it is still lacking in its ability to become One with the Other, it becomes able to question the desire of the Other and we come to Lacan's *Che vuoi?* stage.

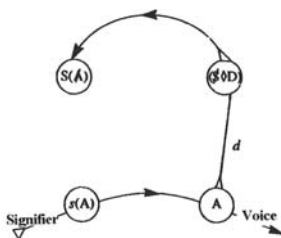
This stage is the second desire of the subject, and it is

made by the subject from the position A, in that the subject has gained a sort of mastery over the use of language (*Seminar VI*, 358). In this act of desire every process that has led up to this moment can be condensed into the line $S.A$ – so that when on the S_2 side this vector can now be completed [Fig. 23], it is essentially equivalent to the vector of the synchronous system $\rightarrow \text{Signifier}.s(A).A$.

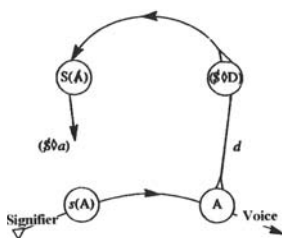


[Fig. 23]

From this position of relative mastery the subject is able to address the Other formally with the question “What do you want from me?” which is represented by the vector $A.d.(S \diamond D).S(A)^2$ [Fig. 24]. Quite literally, this becomes a question with no answer – for the Other *qua* inhuman wants nothing but to subsist, to endure, to parasite the subject and reproduce itself endlessly. For when we pass through the articulation of demand, on through desire and the drives only to find that the Other does not have what we want, namely, an answer, we arrive back at the point where we are outside of the Other. We cannot be properly articulated, and this is what is verified by the vector that runs from $(S \diamond D)$ back to $S(A)$ – that the Other is incomplete and therefore inadequate to meet our demands through the drives or otherwise. In the end the subject is only left to question himself, and as he does this he comes to rediscover the locus $S(A)$ where – not only does he come to realize the lack in the symbolic, but also the place where it falls out of the symbolic and comes to rediscover himself as lacking, both in the symbolic and the imaginary. Here the subject encounters its fantasy, and the answer to the subject’s question can only return through the fantasy in the unconscious at the locus $(S \diamond a)$ [Fig. 25].

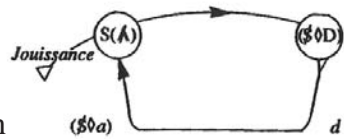


[Fig. 24]



[Fig. 25]

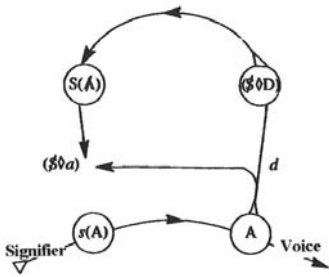
The fantasy is the point in the graph where the subject comes to experience the limit of its being as it realizes itself as the fading subject and is the point at which the subject comes to “rediscover what was lost” (*Seminar VI*, 285, 290). It is the point in the graph where the unconscious accommodates for the lack that can be experienced in consciousness, and as it is the end point of the imaginary circuit, it is a point where the imaginary and symbolic also converge. In the fantasy, the *objet a* “is what intervenes to support this moment, in the synchronic sense, when the subject fails to designate himself at the level of an agency which precisely is that of desire.” (*Seminar VI*, 335). The object in the fantasy is nothing other than the imaginary phallus ($-\phi$) which, in the dialectic of desire, becomes the *objet a* (*Seminar VI*, 319-20). To accommodate for the loss of the symbolic phallus, the *objet a* then “sustains the relation of the subject to what he is not... in so far as he is not the phallus” (*Seminar VI*, 283,320).



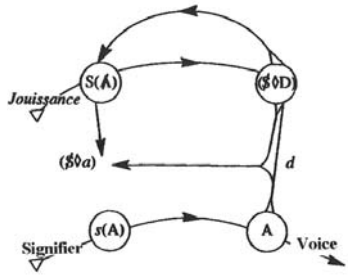
[Fig. 26]

Circuit of the Enunciation of the Subject

The fantasy is located in what Lacan calls the circuit of the “enunciation of the subject” [Fig. 26]. It is constructed to help support that fragment of desire that escapes from demand and cannot be totalized into the drives. We do this in concert with the desire of the Other [Fig. 27], so that the subject’s fantasy is also in part the fantasy of the Other, as it supports not only the desire of the subject but also the desire of the Other [Fig. 28]. Because of this convergence of desires, Lacan says that the subject will develop “a function of protection or of defense,” as, “the structure of the phantasy” is the point where the

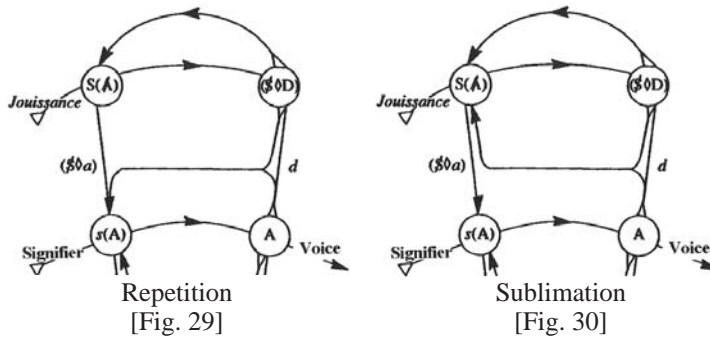


[Fig. 27]



[Fig. 28]

“symptom is going to be produced” (*Seminar VI*, 391-93). For neurotic subjects, the fantasy is located at the “horizon of all the demands,” as the graph represents, but for perverse subjects the fantasy is located “at the heart of all his demands” and is therefore located in the drives at ($\$ \diamond D$).



From the neurotic locus of the fantasy, movement in the graph can proceed in two directions, either into $s(A)$ or $S(A)$. Here the subject is situated in “relation between the accident, which is repeated, and the veiled meaning, which is the true reality and leads us towards the drive” (*Seminar XI*, 69). From this locus subjects can either engage in neurotic repetition and descend to reinforce the signification of their symptoms at the position $s(A)$ [Fig. 29] or the circuit of the enunciation of the subject can be realized, as through the process of sublimation the subject finds itself outside of signification at $S(A)$ [Fig. 30].

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Endnotes

ⁱ Note that references to *Écrits* refer to the French pagination, that Fink keeps in the margins, and not to the English pagination.

¹*Seminar XI* p. 198.

²Long notation: °Subject.s(A).A.d.(S◇D).S(A) which is also equal to S.A.d.(S◇D).S(A)