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## Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

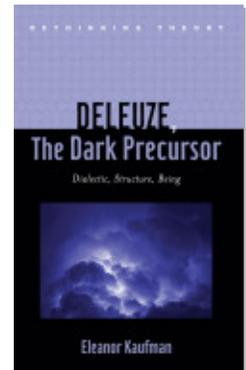
Kaufman, Eleanor.

Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

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## In the Middle of Things

**A**BREATHKING, TERRIFYING VERTICALITY emanates from the skyscrapers in New York City. This verticality reflects a certain vision of space, one that is monumental, urban, large scale. Here I wish to speak of another kind of space, one that is not urban — or not necessarily so — one that is small scale to the point of not even being recognized as existing, yet equally monumental in its intensity. This space has its own verticality, which is the verticality of vast flatness, occasionally set off by a small yet pivotal elevation. This space is marked by what I'd like to call a plane of slight elevation, which could range anywhere from the space of about a story high to the space of not being yet six feet under — or to the space of thought itself.

In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze describes the space of the baroque house as punctuated by two levels, the lower level forming a façade, a sort of infinite space for perception, the upper level being a pure, closed interiority.<sup>1</sup> These two floors are separated by a fold, which both sets them apart and reflects the tension of their inextricable belonging to each other. Deleuze writes (and this will be analyzed in more detail in chapter 12), “We are dealing with two cities, a celestial Jerusalem and an earthly one, but with the rooftops and foundations of a same city, and the two floors of a same house.”<sup>2</sup> My pursuit here is this fold, or this plane of elevation, as it is figured in nonurban space.

Living on the coasts of this country, one often encounters the mind-set that not only is the middle of the country devoid of urban space and all the culture and cosmopolitanism that it implies, but this middle, for all intents and purposes, is devoid of existence period, other than constituting that liminal space which one flies over to get from New York to California. In *America*, Jean Baudrillard is greatly taken by the pure verticality of New York City and the pure expanse of the desert. He highlights the superiority of the two American coasts when he writes: “We in Europe possess the art

of thinking, of analyzing things and reflecting on them. No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination. Even the great minds across the Atlantic envy us in this regard. But the resounding truths, the realities of genuinely great monument today are to be found along the Pacific seaboard or in Manhattan. It has to be said that New York and Los Angeles are at the centre of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

There may be some sense in which this is true, but it is precisely not the center I wish to regard but the middle, which exists in a thoroughly different space. Baudrillard writes a great deal about speed—he says that “speed creates pure objects”—and a great deal about driving, which, he says, “produces a kind of invisibility, transparency or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out.”<sup>4</sup> We saw such examples in Kerouac, Nabokov, and Auster in chapter 8. Here, I wish to look not at the driving, which produces a kind of invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things, but rather at the things that produce a visibility, plenitude, and plane of elevation in the driving.

If you drive on the Kansas Turnpike from Emporia to Topeka, you see on your right the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas. These hills have little foliage. They are small, discontinuous grassy mounds that bring into stunning relief the flat grandeur of the landscape. Driving on the turnpike, one comes to a rest area every thirty to forty miles, and at the rest area in the Flint Hills region, in addition to the Hardee’s that serves pretzels and banana milkshakes, stands a large plaque erected in memory of the famous football player and coach Knute Rockne, who died when his plane crashed in these hills during a lightning storm.

One summer evening a no-longer-young couple, with a child waiting to be born, drove alone in their car through the Flint Hills at the height of a torrential midwestern thunderstorm. They wondered just how secure their car was when it came to lightning because, when they thought about it, set apart as they were even from the hills, they were the tallest thing on the landscape. What was their speed compared with the speed of death, from that terrifying plane of elevation, that plane which was their yellow ’54 Chevrolet? No matter how fast they drove, they remained immobilized by the forces above, their speed being that of the terror from within.

On the Will Rogers Turnpike, between Tulsa and Oklahoma City, there is a small town called Stroud, which also features one of the scarce turn-

pike rest stations. The station, here a Howard Johnson's, is on one side of the highway but is fortuitously connected to the other side by a small pedestrian overpass. From this narrow overpass one can look out on the highway's receding, its diminishing toward either Tulsa or Oklahoma City. The Tulsa side features a lengthy vista of highway as it first stretches over a long straightaway and then gradually winds up into a slightly raised hill. However, on the side that leads to Oklahoma City, one encounters right away a sharp bend in the road, so that only a very small stretch of highway is visible from the overpass.

On the overpass stands a little child, maybe eight or nine. This child will barely speak to people, but she likes to greet the cars as they pass there underneath at Stroud. With the cars that she loves, she plays a vicious game of interpellation. As the cars approach her at their speeds, she stands there, waving furiously. And as she stands there, the immobile greeter, she makes small statistical calculations. She finds the trucks most favorably inclined to return her greeting: almost one of two waves back and even smiles. And she never quite knows if it's because they're just friendlier in trucks or because they're closer to her plane of elevation. (After all, Laura Ingalls on the TV show *Little House on the Prairie* decided to climb a whole mountain just so God could better hear her prayers.) And in the regular cars, the child notices a strange discrepancy. On the side facing Oklahoma City, where the cars abruptly round the bend, she finds the response to her wave to be nearly as good as the trucks — say, one in three. But, on the Tulsa side, where the cars have about a mile's driving time in which to spot her hand, they largely neglect her — maybe one in five, one in six, waves back. It seems that those cars had the space and time to gracefully feign ignorance of the small child above. But the Oklahoma City cars, caught as they were in the stillness of their speed, in the encounter with the immobility of the plane of elevation, didn't have a full-blown chance not to respond.

About ten miles down the highway in the Oklahoma City direction is another small town, even smaller than Stoud. That town has a Tastee Freeze and a diner called Fendy's with a funeral parlor right next door. It has a small motel and several churches — Protestant — with one Catholic church. On the outskirts of town is a beautiful and spacious cemetery called Oaklawn with seemingly more inhabitants than the town proper. As in most

cemeteries, you can walk around Oaklawn and see many gravestones of people who belong to the same family. But they're not all together. It's not a family-tree kind of logic but one of an unpredictably expansive subterranean root structure, for the roots arrive in their own disordered order, some of them never even coming. And if you are bent on decoding the tombstones, you find that the name on the front is often quite misleading, because in many instances there's one last name on the front side of the stone but another, a maiden name, on the back, and thus you find, for example, that it's another one of those dead Deans. And you wonder what all those dead Deans are doing down there, in that red Oklahoma soil, rooted in the madness of their scattered proximity. Do you think they have the concept of family reunion from six feet under? When you stand still, underneath a large tree, in that space of elevation above them, it's nice to think in reverse perspective, like turning your head upside down and pretending the ceiling of a house is the floor (this example is taken up again in the concluding chapter). If you think of them, then, as a city of souls and bodies looking at we who stand above, you have to wonder what form their vision takes and what form of movement is spawned by the electric immobility of the dead.

If you take the Will Rogers Turnpike back east through Tulsa, where it becomes the Turner Turnpike, and continue well past Vinita — the other, more majestic rest stop—diner that connects both sides of the highway and also allows for the waving game — you find the road once again changes names when you cross the Missouri state line. Now it's Interstate 44, which in the old highway system was the famous Route 66. Past Joplin and Springfield, before Phillipsburg and Lebanon, there's a town in the middle called Conway — another little town with a cemetery. If you get off at Conway and take the exit ramp to its full height, you see there alone on the landscape a middle-sized structure named McShane's but more properly called The Home of the Little Round Pie, because in this highway diner live little round pies. The little round pies are half the size of regular pies but overflow with the fullness of their pie stuff. There are apple pies, raisin pies, peach pies, pineapple pies — any kind of pie you can name. It's not unlike the passage from Marvell: "Let us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into one ball, / And tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life."<sup>5</sup> Compressed into this small portion

of round pie space is a nearly infinite density. It's the density of stuff standing still, awaiting its imminent incorporation, yet by reverse always incorporating the incorporator.

I return to Baudrillard, who writes: "When I see Americans, particularly American intellectuals, casting a nostalgic eye towards Europe, its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, and its past, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference. History and Marxism are like fine wines and haute cuisine: they do not really cross the ocean, in spite of the many impressive attempts that have been made to adapt them to new surroundings."<sup>6</sup>

To the north of Conway, in the middle spaces of Missouri, is another small town called Hallsville. Just outside this town is a girl named Sue, who grows up on a farm. She has a little friend from the neighboring town, a bigger town, and this friend isn't entirely used to being on a farm. But Sue and her friend are up in the hayloft of Sue's barn, engaging in some trifling indiscretions as they talk. Sue asks her friend: "When we grow up, will you take me around the world with you?"

Here I should add that there are all sorts of towns in Missouri that share their names with bigger places like Mexico, California, Cuba, Lebanon, New London, Nevada, and Versailles (pronounced Versales), and Sue and her friend, who have hardly ever crossed the state line, like to talk about how they're going to travel to the real London, the real Mexico, the real Cuba — to all those big places, countries, cities. And the friend tells Sue, "Yeah, I'll take you around the world with me. We'll travel, we'll go to France, we'll speak real fine French, we'll go to the real Versales, you name it."

Sue and her friend never travel around the world together; they grow up and fall out of touch, but, after a period of many years, they talk again. The first thing that Sue says (and I should add that at the friend's house there was one of these early electronic games — TV table tennis — which the two girls liked to play together, and in this game, when the little pellet on the screen successfully hit the racket apparatus, there was this very peculiar beep that sounded), ending those many years of silence, is "I thought of you just today — I heard this beep that was just like the one on your TV thing."

It seems that that beep has been resonating for years, that beep as their space of travel. Because they *have* traveled together, if not exactly around the world, then around. For they traveled as they sat there, as they sit

there, in the middle of that thing called America, like being in the eye of the storm, the lull of that most stupendous of violences. They never went to France together, but the speed that they traveled was faster than any Concord jet, the beeping in their heads more deafening than any airplane roar. It was the dizzying implosiveness of what they had, and still have, lying there, immobile, in that hayloft in Hallsville, looking down at the cows and the electric fence from their plane of slight elevation. The force of that immobility is as great as the vertical bombardment of all the skyscrapers in New York put together.

Certainly these girls missed the range of experiences they could have had had they lived somewhere else, had they lived in a big city. In fact, they probably could have stayed put in any metropolitan space and traveled just as far and just as fast. But the point is that they were where they were, in the middle, out in the middle of nowhere. And perhaps it will have taken them a lifetime, or more, to know — really know — the intensity that was had, that is always had, just sitting still.