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Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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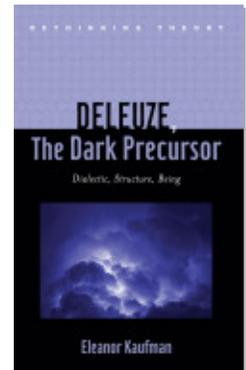
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Living Virtually in a Cluttered House

IN *THE POETICS OF SPACE*, Gaston Bachelard proposes a new field of investigation or perception, one that would be attuned, like psychoanalysis, to inner psychological states, yet also attuned to the way architecture and space affect those states. He terms such a field “topoanalysis” and defines it as “the systematic study of the sites of our intimate lives.”¹ Central to a topoanalytic approach is an attentiveness to the nuances and registers of the space of the house. Bachelard focuses on the intimate and solitary relation of the home dweller to the space of the house:

And so, faced with these periods of solitude, the topoanalyst starts to ask these questions: Was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? Was the nook warm? How was it lighted? How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence? How did he relish the very special silence of the various retreats of solitary daydreaming? . . . And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative; that even when it is forever expunged from the present, when, henceforth, it is alien to all the promises of the future, even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. . . . In the past, the attic may have seemed too small, it may have seemed cold in winter and hot in summer. Now, however, in memory recaptured through daydreams, it is hard to say through what syncretism the attic is at once small and large, warm and cool, always comforting.²

In Bachelard's phenomenology, the space of the house leaves a lingering trace that, when revisited through memory or dreams, recreates very palpably the precise nooks and crannies of the former lived space but does so through a different perceptual lens. This new and different lens might be described as virtual both in that it regards the house space from a spatio-temporal vantage point of some distance and in that the atmospheric conditions it conjures up are in some sense mutually exclusive—a space both big and small, a temperature both warm and cool—that yet can be perceived as existing simultaneously. For Bachelard, such a perception is linked to the state of distance, to the fact that one no longer actually lives in the space in question. In this fashion, the space of the house has perceptual import insofar as it is linked to a distant past, generally that of childhood: “Through this permanent childhood, we maintain the poetry of the past. To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it.”³ Repeated here are terms of distance: “childhood,” “poetry of the past,” “inhabit in memory,” “house that is gone,” “used to dream in it.” The unique and beautiful form of perception that Bachelard captures is critically dependent on a state of distance, both in space and in time. What would happen if we were to retain this form of perception but rethink its seemingly exclusive link to a state that is past?

As we saw in the introduction, Deleuze opens *The Logic of Sense* with an example similar to Bachelard's but locates it at the conjunction of past and future rather than strictly in the past:

Alice and Through the Looking-Glass involve a category of very special things: events, pure events. When I say “Alice becomes larger,” I mean that she becomes larger than she was. By the same token, however, she becomes smaller than she is now. Certainly, she is not bigger and smaller at the same time. She is larger now; she was smaller before. But it is at the same moment that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes. This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once: Alice does not grow without shrinking and vice versa.⁴

This example does not oppose past and future but instead collapses them and opposes both together to the present. As we have seen, the present (Chronos) is clearly in a subordinate relation to the conjunction of past and future (Aion). Nonetheless, and in the fashion of the preceding discussion of Blanchot, I would like to linger on the question of the present—especially as it intersects with the notion of the everyday—and pose the following question: is it possible to reach “the essence of becoming” (is this in fact being?), to perceive virtually in a space that is lived-in in the present, to make of everyday house-space something that is also virtual?

In this light, I will examine the space of the lived-in house and the way in which the architecture of everyday life might be said simultaneously to give rise to new virtual worlds. To start with an example of how the virtual inheres in real-life time and space, one might picture what would happen if the space of the house were literally turned upside down. Perhaps it is the child’s game mentioned earlier in which you turn your head upside down so that the house’s ceiling becomes its floor, and you perceive the huge moldings that would have to be straddled to pass from one empty room into another. This is an exhilarating and spacious game, for there is no stuff cluttering the ceilings, just empty rooms bordered by foot-high fences; it is a minimalist and ethereal space uncluttered by the objects below. The upside-down ceiling world of the house is entirely composed of actually existing space, yet it is a space viewed from such a skewed angle as to seem altogether otherworldly. Furthermore, the ceiling world exists on a level that is in between. Assuming one is on the first floor, the ceiling world forms a sort of mezzanine between the first floor and the invisible second floor, which from this topsy-turvy vantage point becomes the ceiling world’s basement.⁵

I wish to apply such a vantage point to a reading of several disparate texts—spanning the domains of philosophy, architecture, literature, and cultural geography—that each highlight a point of convergence between virtual architecture and everyday space. The central text is Deleuze’s *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, which argues for a unique relation between the baroque house and virtual perception. Deleuze begins this unorthodox study of Leibniz with a detailed analysis of the space of the baroque house, which is defined by the fact that it has only two levels, with a folded space that separates them. Deleuze distinguishes baroque space as follows: “The

universe as a stairwell marks the Neoplatonic tradition. But the Baroque contribution par excellence is a world with only two floors, separated by a fold that echoes itself, arching from the two sides according to a different order.”⁶ At issue here are, on the one hand, the demarcation of two distinct floors or levels and, on the other, the liminal or boundary space — the fold or point of inflection — where the two levels come together.

The two levels of the baroque house would appear to be diametric opposites: the lower level is large, open, public, and spacious, while the upper level is small, windowless, private, and closed. Furthermore, the lower level corresponds with the body, while the upper level corresponds with the soul. Deleuze distinguishes the two levels with a series of characteristics that are repeated with slight variation throughout *The Fold*:

The lower level is assigned to the façade, which is elongated by being punctured and bent back according to the folds determined by a heavy matter, forming an infinite room for reception or receptivity. The upper level is closed, as a pure inside without an outside, a weightless, closed interiority, its walls hung with spontaneous folds that are now only those of a soul or a mind.⁷

This passage illustrates the way in which, in Deleuze’s reading of the baroque house, the two levels are at once entirely distinct yet everywhere imbued with the same stuff, here the stuff being the folds themselves: “the lower level . . . punctured and bent back according to the folds determined by a heavy matter” and “the upper level . . . , its walls hung with spontaneous folds.” The fold then, exists both between and within each level of the baroque house. The fold both sets the two floors apart and reflects the tension of their inextricable belonging to each other. Deleuze writes, “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 floors of a same house. . . . For Leibniz, the two floors are and will remain inseparable; they are really distinct and yet inseparable by dint of a presence of the upper in the lower. The upper floor is folded over the lower floor. One is not acting upon the other, but one belongs to the other, in a sense of a double belonging.”⁸

The example of the baroque house highlights the complex dynamic of two interconnected spatial entities. On the one hand, the spaces are clearly distinct: a given room exists on one floor and not the other (unless the house collapses). On the other hand, both floors are composed of the same

materials, at least in their points of contact, and are part of the same larger entity. Moreover, the second floor would not exist without the first floor, or else there would just be the first floor. Then again, and this will be taken up in what follows, the question remains as to whether a single floor is really single or whether it also presupposes a virtual second floor. It seems that the latter is the case at least in France where the numbering of floors begins with what in American terminology is already the second floor. Such conundrums might be puzzled out further, but what matters is that they have real bearing on the way we perceive the space around us and thus real bearing on the way lives are lived, particularly in nonextreme moments, which is most of the time.

This question of the “double belonging” or adjacency of two distinct yet inseparable entities comes to the foreground in the relation between mind and body, to which we briefly return. Using the framework of the baroque house as a point of departure, Deleuze connects this framework on numerous occasions to the mind-body question. Deleuze’s model of baroque space in fact also serves as a conceptual model for a similar relation between body and soul. In elaborating this connection, Deleuze begins with a reference to religious art:

We move from funerary figures of the Basilica of Saint Laurence to the figures on the ceiling of Saint Ignatius. It might be claimed that physical gravity and religious elevation are quite different and do not pertain to the same world. However, these are two vectors that are allotted as such in the distinction of the two levels or floors of a single and same world, or of the single and same house. It is because the body and the soul have no point in being inseparable, for they are not in the least really distinct. . . . From this point on any localization of the soul in an area of the body, no matter how tiny it may be, amounts rather to a *projection* from the top to the bottom, a projection of the soul focalizing on a “point” of the body, in conformity with [Desargues’s] geometry, that develops from a Baroque perspective.⁹

By this account, the body and the soul coexist in an adjacent and mutually dependent relation (as discussed in chapter 2) that parallels that between the two floors of a same house. Just as he poses the two floors as distinct yet inextricably connected, so too does Deleuze, in a double move, both affirm a mind-body duality and affirm that mind and body are not really separable.¹⁰

It is this coexistence of seemingly competing realities that Deleuze, drawing on Leibniz, characterizes as impossibility.¹¹ Impossibilities, Deleuze implies, may be negotiated by means of differential perspective and projection (“From this point on any localization of the soul in an area of the body, no matter how tiny it may be, amounts rather to a *projection* from the top to the bottom, a projection of the soul focalizing on a ‘point’ of the body”). In other words, just as a room looks quite different depending on whether it is viewed with the head upright or upside down, though it is all the while composed of the same space and objects, so too could the body and soul be said to belong to the same space yet appear entirely different when projected onto that space from different vantage points. This concept of using an unusual angle of projection to conjoin two incompatible worlds is essentially what Lacan designates by the term *anamorphosis* in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. He writes,

In my seminar, I have made great use of the function of anamorphosis, in so far as it is an exemplary structure. What does a simple, non-cylindrical anamorphosis consist of? Suppose there is a portrait on this flat piece of paper that I am holding. By chance, you see the blackboard, in an oblique position in relation to the piece of paper. Suppose that, by means of a series of ideal threads of lines, I reproduce on the oblique surface each point of the image drawn on my sheet of paper. You can easily imagine what the result would be — you would obtain a figure enlarged and distorted according to the lines of what may be called a perspective.¹²

Lacan goes on to discuss Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, in which a skull in the foreground is so distorted by anamorphosis that it is virtually unrecognizable. Anamorphosis illustrates, as it were, the blind spot or impossibility between the gaze that regards the object in its “normal” appearance and the other gaze that is destabilized by the distortion. Through this differential, it effectively reveals the distortion inherent in all perception.

Whereas the anamorphic relation represents a differential between two extremely dissimilar perspectives, the line of inflection also differentiates but does so between nonextreme points. Deleuze characterizes inflection as follows: “[T]he infinite fold separates or passes between matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the exterior and the interior. The line of inflection is a virtuality that never ceases to differentiate: it is actualized in

the soul but realized in matter, each on its own side.”¹³ While Deleuze refers to the question of inflection in a number of instances, this concept is more fully developed in Bernard Cache’s *Earth Moves*, a work that takes up the Deleuzian notions of inflection and the fold and elaborates them within a more architectural framework.¹⁴ According to Cache, points of inflection are distinct from those points that can be mapped as the minima or maxima of a curve.¹⁵ Whereas the minima and maxima can be easily pinpointed and defined because they are at either extreme, points of inflection are precisely those points in the middle that generally go unnoticed because they reside between extremes. In other terms, Cache writes: “Let it be given that the world is the set of the best possible images, and also of the best images possible. On the surface, inflection is the mark of images that can’t be the best and that are thus outside the world and its inclines, though they are a part of it.”¹⁶ The space of inflection, then, is that space that would almost pass unnoticed in favor of its more noticeable and striking proximate spaces.¹⁷ It is the little world that, when caught at the right angle and from the right perspective, shows itself to be a rich and varied inner world residing at the heart of what appears to be something else.

Inflection, then, is not entirely different from the more radical and dialectical notions of impossibility and anamorphosis, but it enacts them on a more minor scale. And it is precisely in its ability to designate a minoriness of scale that I am highlighting inflection as the term most appropriate to a reimagination of everyday space and objects. Inflection concerns ordinary details of actual space that do not require an elaborate conceptual system in order to be decoded, yet at the same time these details are often so ordinary as to appear banal and unworthy of extended reflection. In this regard, inflection is not unlike a strategy of defamiliarization, except that it is not so much a sustained strategy or method as it is a momentary bracketing of conditioned modes of perception.¹⁸ It is by definition something that can only be sustained briefly. As Cache writes,

When, in the images that surround us, we are able to concentrate only on inflections, we accede to another regime of images that we call primary ones. This perception is necessarily fleeting and variable, since we can’t become “used” to it. We can’t settle into it through the determination of a best reaction; it is a mobile image in which an unlocatable position eludes our comfort.¹⁹

Concentrating on inflections thus produces what by most standards is a skewed perception: it is akin to pretending the floor of the room is its ceiling, or focusing on an object or space that by all objective standards has very little interest or merit but, when viewed from the right angle, casts an entirely different light on everything. The point of inflection, since it is in the middle and does not partake of the extremes, not only goes largely unnoticed but, when it is noticed, appears as a sort of continuous minimalist space.

As in the example from chapter 10, one generally hears (if one lives on one of the United States coasts) midwestern landscape evoked as being just about the most dull and monotonous landscape to be found. Beyond that, Kansas is frequently singled out as epitomizing this endless and dreary landscape. When confronted by such truisms, I can't help but wonder what the people speaking them were seeing when and if they drove through the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas. These rolling mounds, rising only a few stories above the plane of the horizon, are to my mind as breathtaking as any scenery in the United States, breathtaking because they mark such a slight, yet for this reason monumental, departure from the line of the vast landscape. From this perspective, each mound is an austere mountain recasting the line of the plain below. Here, the line of inflection inheres in two perspectives at once. On the one hand, it is flatness in all its nonminimal and nonmaximal monotony ("nonscenic" from many vantage points). On the other hand, it is the minute variation, the slight departure that the low mound makes from the plane of consistency. In both cases, the point of inflection inheres in a minimalist continuum yet refocuses that continuum in such a fashion as to highlight its singularity.

In *Earth Moves*, Cache revisits the link between minimalist continuity and modernism. He views the emphasis on continuity as a modern impulse that has been too summarily dismissed in the wake of postmodernism. He writes that "modernism has been ostracized today in the name of a post-modernity whose eclecticism barely conceals its sterility."²⁰ Furthermore, the modern continuum, like the baroque house, integrates discrete levels or domains while allowing those domains to retain their distinctions. By contrast, the postmodern is often portrayed as smoothing out all values and points of fixity (though in any given instance, it most likely comes closer to the above description of the modern). Cache glosses the relation between the modern continuum and its unnamed opponent as follows:

[M]odern optics speaks of this chiasmus where great causes have small effects and vice versa. But nonetheless, this plane has its own topography. On a continuum without values, everything can dissolve into inconsistency; however, if we negotiate its inflections, we can ensure continuities between the most disparate registers, between the most distant eras. . . . Each postulate of the modernist movement, once rid of the principle of unity, can be understood as the expression of a desire for continuity between the social, the technical, and the formal. . . . Instead of simply quoting inconsistent and gratuitous images, our epoch takes up the modern challenge of continuity. If collage appeared to be the paradigm of modernism, it is because it allowed our eye to seek out that invisible line that traces a continuity between images, fields of knowledge, and the most diverse practices. . . . It seems that inflection is precisely the new sign of the modern continuum.²¹

Beyond the overt apology for modernism, Cache is more nearly interested in contemporary appropriations of specifically modernist traits and techniques. Cache finds such traits and techniques—like the flat roof in architecture or the collage in painting—noteworthy in the way they fold disparate aesthetic and political registers into a useful continuum. This is not unlike the virtual ceiling world of the two-story house, which might bring an otherwise unremarkable or even impoverished house space into a noncontradictory continuum with what might appear to be nothing but rarefied high aestheticism (the minimalist ceiling world). Simply put, at issue is the possibility of a perception that would inject into the most ordinary of spaces an aestheticized or defamiliarized otherness. It might be argued that such a mode of perception devalues the very real social or economic conditions that permeate and overdetermine the dwelling conditions of the given abode in favor of a depoliticized aestheticism. But such an argument takes as a fundamental assumption that the aesthetic is somehow incompatible or negligible when the living conditions become harsh enough and fails to consider that aesthetic perception has no natural and exclusive affinity with the privileged and educated classes.²²

It is precisely such an assumption that inheres in an otherwise compelling study of the link between modernism and the idea of the noble household. The study is Vincent Pecora's *Households of the Soul*, a meditation on the literary, philosophical, and economic dimensions of modernism.

Pecora's aim is "to understand how an imaginary household emerged within modernism at large"²³ and how such a household also functions in the domains of language and literary theory. Pecora links this imaginary household to a nostalgia for a "noble household" that is aristocratic and not everyday. Drawing on close readings of Conrad, Joyce, Yeats, and Lawrence among others, Pecora argues that "the modern invention of the archaic and courtly household—a largely masculine, heroic, and 'noble' affair . . . —is thus for me a rather basic reaction to the economic rationalization of civil society and the feminization of the bourgeois domestic sphere, but a response with manifold implications."²⁴ These implications, which Pecora spells out in extended close readings of multiple high modernist texts, point to a retrograde and conservative, if not imperialist, longing for an era of precapitalist sovereignty in which the noble estate served as a place of refuge for the aristocratic.

Although Pecora masterfully supports this thesis with examples that range over both canonical and more obscure modernist texts, he does not consider the potential non-elitist implications of the noble household, nor does he consider in any detail descriptions of the actual physical space of the households in question. For example, in his reading of *Time Regained*, the last volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Pecora locates the stately Guermantes mansion as inspiring Marcel's series of past recollections not because of the objects it contains or its associations with childhood but because it abstractly represents the "charm" of the aristocratic for a young bourgeois boy. The one object Pecora focuses on is the "beautiful first editions" in the Guermantes library, which for him underscore the link between noble household, aesthetic recollection, and writing.²⁵ Although these connections are certainly valid, they undermine any specificity of space or objecthood within a particular house. As Pecora writes, "[F]or the adult Marcel, it is the ancestral, princely household represented by that name and neither simply a specific house (which, after all, was often one of many for the nobility) nor the actual family that matters."²⁶ While the Proustian and other modernist households Pecora analyzes unquestionably have an elitist function, it seems improbable that this is their only function. Indeed, an attentiveness to the actual space and objects within the house alongside an attentiveness to their class and social functions might produce other angles of analysis. With regard to the first editions, though they are markers of privilege, they also mark how objects and impressions

are modulated by time. As Marcel himself explains, “[T]he first edition of a work would have been more precious in my eyes than any other, but by this term I should have understood the edition in which I read it for the first time.”²⁷ Marcel, like Bachelard, uses objects and spaces as a conduit for reexamining and remapping life-defining events.²⁸ That such a form of perception is only available in aristocratic spaces seems itself to be an elitist presumption.

Such an attentiveness to everyday physical space and household objects is central to Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck’s *Home Rules*, a study that takes a supremely localized point of departure. Whereas Pecora focuses on the abstract idea of the household as a recurrent motif in a vast array of literature and literary theory, Wood and Beck focus minutely on specific objects and spatial relations and produce a reading so detail oriented (a sort of *S/Z* of the suburban home) that it too attains a high level of abstraction, albeit from a completely different vantage point — which underscores that it is the context that makes abstraction value laden and not abstraction per se. In contrast to Pecora, Wood and Beck suggest that the virtual spaces of the house are not necessarily spaces of privilege but rather spaces that open up new perspectives on those things that seem most common. In *Home Rules*, which brings the domains of architecture, geography, anthropology, and structuralism into unique convergence, Wood and Beck analyze the elaborate codes that inform the Wood family’s mode of dwelling in their North Carolina home. In considering the complex interpersonal and spatial rules that govern such household minutiae as “the screen door,” “the radiator by the stair,” “the plant on the floor in front of the easel,” and “the piece of wire on the mantleshelf,” Wood and Beck defamiliarize basic household objects to such an extent that they are ultimately transformed into new and virtual entities.

This virtual perception of the everyday, this making strange of the everyday, is foregrounded repeatedly by Wood and Beck. They frequently point out, as in the following description of the radiator, how common household objects are generally disregarded except when their form or function makes them stand out: “It is easy to overlook the radiator, easy to let it be swamped by the many things clamoring for attention. It is easy to lose it in the space below the window, to let the wall absorb it. Unless it’s winter and the snow is falling . . . then the radiator becomes the very *raison d’être* for being in the room, for turning the rocker round to face

the window: to watch the weather across the toasting toes.”²⁹ Under special circumstances, a little-noticed object—the radiator—undergoes a transformation such that it becomes the focal point of its surroundings. What is striking here is that the radiator becomes the visual focal point of the room precisely because of its nonvisual attribute: its ability to produce heat. Although the form of defamiliarized perception at issue has been outlined predominantly through visual examples, this perception is in no way the exclusive domain of the visual. Indeed, the most memorable examples of phenomenological association (Proust’s madeleine, Bachelard’s house that is both hot and cold, Merleau-Ponty’s example of two hands touching)³⁰ rely on the less hegemonic senses of taste and touch. Nonetheless, the very description of these other sensory modes of perception is never at far remove from the visual: hence the formulation “to *watch* the weather” in its stunning juxtaposition with “across the toasting toes.”³¹

Watching the weather outside from the vantage point of the radiator-warmed inside also underscores a strong dualism operative not only in Wood and Beck’s analysis but also in Deleuze’s description of the two-story house. In addition to objects such as the radiator, Wood and Beck also scrutinize the house’s walls, floors, and ceilings. The analysis of the ceiling is particularly striking in its resonance with Deleuze’s model of a tiered or two-fold entity. Here, instead of first and second floors, the two levels—modeled after each other yet in fundamental opposition—are the ceiling and the sky. In a singularly lyrical passage, Wood and Beck describe the ceiling:

It is nothing of the exosphere, the ionosphere, the stratosphere, the troposphere. It is nothing of the atmosphere. It is not of air. It is not of nature at all. . . . It will constitute itself as anti-sky. Where the sky is hyalescent, the ceiling will be both matte and opaque. Where the sky is blue, the ceiling will be white. Where the sky is proteiform, the ceiling will be changeless (or only a little more grimy year after year). Where the sky is immaterial, the ceiling will be indurate. Where the sky is deep, the ceiling will be flat. Where the sky may rain, the ceiling will always be dry. The ceiling will be a matte, opaque, unchanging, indurate, dry, flat whiteness. It will be paper. It will be harder than paper. It will be chalk. It will be marble.³²

At every point, the ceiling is comparable to the sky, although they exist at opposite ends of the sensory spectrum. Wood and Beck go on to argue that

the ceiling perfectly doubles or mirrors the sky so as to better renounce it (along with the natural world and those who live directly underneath the sky).³³ In a similar fashion, the ceiling/floor division partakes of the same relation of oppositional doubling: “the ceiling is nonetheless forced to constitute itself as anti-floor (the room cannot afford to obliterate the paradigm . . .).”³⁴

Wood and Beck imply that the ceiling’s function is loftier and more cultured than that of either the floor or the sky. This accounts for the fact that the rules of the house — designed primarily for the two children who live there — are much more stringent about keeping dirt off the ceiling than off the floor. From the children’s vantage point, then, the ceiling has a pristine and untouchable quality that would perhaps account for the desire to reverse the household order by a turning of the head which makes the ceiling into the floor. Such a game would also subvert the strict opposition between the codes surrounding ceiling and floor, at least in the household featured in *Home Rules*. This household functions by a logic of doubles similar to those of Deleuze’s baroque house (the first and second floors in Deleuze, the ceiling and floor in Wood and Beck). Both the ceiling and the second floor carry with them an unacknowledged privilege, yet neither could exist without its inextricable belonging to the lower term: on the one hand, the ceiling as it is perched over the floor, on the other, the second floor as it is supported by the first floor. Whether one chooses to focus on the fundamental dualism or the interpenetrability of the two terms is itself a matter (and not an innocent one) of perception.

In conclusion, I return to another and more devious version of the upside-down ceiling game as well as to the question of what takes place if the house under consideration has only one floor. In the fashion of Wood and Beck, we might play a sort of hologram game with a certain first floor, a floor packed to bursting with stuff, a floor belonging to a house so full there is only one place to sit and one path by which to navigate, a house so decrepit that it would be unthinkable to fix the stove, the termite-ridden floorboards, the cracks in the walls, the heating — a house so solitary that only one guest is ever asked in. Yet that guest finds in this cluttered, decrepit house a sublimity that the host, who never leaves the house, cannot fathom and would not want to. The guest sits at a portion of the kitchen table that has been cleared off, the space on which to write a letter

or a book as the host sleeps. Somehow amid the broken television, the hot plate, the bowl of sugar packets, the stack of meticulously arranged secret notes, the loaves of white bread, the little lamp, the vitamin bottles, the candle, the seven-year-old plant cutting, the hand-carved plaque that reads “Something Good Is Going to Happen” — somehow amid all those objects that encroach upon the guest with years’ worth of weight, somehow that guest perceives only spaciousness and hears only silence. The uncluttered section of the table seems as if it were stretching to infinity, the objects that stare back too familiar to be real, too transparent to take up weight and space. The point is that, resting as they do in the guest’s ever more skewed plane of perception, these objects, this real-life clutter, is as virtual as the undifferentiated space of the celestial ceiling world.

Maurice Blanchot provides a somewhat different model of the virtual house in his inexpressibly strange novel *Aminadab*. In this story, Thomas, the central character, enters a house one day, drawn by the beckoning wave of a woman standing by the window on one of the upper floors. Upon entering, he finds himself not in a regular building as he had thought but, instead, in the machine of an infernal house where he is ushered from room to room by guardians and housekeepers and servants, never returning to the room he had previously entered, and never gaining access to the elusive second floor. This hermetic house-world is divided between tenants (which he is) and servants, both of whom keep changing and rarely if ever reappear in their former guise. At one point, Thomas is chained to an unknown companion; at another he sees a tenant with a face painted over his real one; at still another he tries to stop a rebellion in which the inhabitants decide to walk up to the second floor, something that is forbidden and that proves disastrous. At every point, Thomas tries to pin down the elusive laws that govern the house’s monotonously indecipherable series of encounters, tortures, and comings and goings. The house is a minefield of virtual maps, each pretending to hold the code to the ever-unfathomable floor plan. At a singularly eventful moment, Thomas learns that he is the house’s executioner.³⁵

By way of commentary on the virtual house of *Aminadab*, I return to the cluttered house mentioned above. At one point in time, a certain dweller of this cluttered house (one who is no longer there) devised a plan for making the cluttered house more spacious, a plan in fact suggested by a stranger off the street to whom had been offhandedly confided the prob-

lem of the clutter in the house. The plan was to add a whole second floor that would extend upward from the broom closet of the little one-story house. The child in the house was told of the plan and constructed a virtual second-floor world to play in. There the child would have a room of its own from which to supervise imaginary brothers and sisters and recalcitrant stuffed animals. There in the world of the second floor the child might reinvent the strange laws by which its actual house was governed, reinvent them and make them stranger.

Unfortunately, since the house was a rented one, such an addition on the part of the tenants was by definition impossible, just as in Blanchot's novel it is similarly impossible for the tenants to go up to the second floor. But the child had not understood this impossible law of capital properly, and so the virtual world of the second floor grew and grew each day, constantly adding new laws and dispensing with old ones, and eventually bumping up against the houses of Deleuze and Blanchot with all their similar second-floor virtuality, giving the child, as it were, a home away from home, a home that resembled the little cluttered house and at some moments and spaces was indeed the very same house. But this story, too, has its own horrible point of recognition, the recognition that, indeed, this lovely and mythical little child has all along been, and in fact still is, that cluttered house's executioner.

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