

DIAGRAM OF THE AMOROUS SEARCH: GENERAT- ING DESIRE WITH GUIRAUDIE'S *L'INCONNU DU LAC*¹

Nathan Friedman

What I hide by my language, my body utters.
Roland Barthes

Throughout *A Lover's Discourse* Roland Barthes makes frequent comparison between body and language. The body is nuanced, a site of involuntary signs to be interpreted, while language is trapped by performative extremes, at once “*too much* and *too little*.” The truest of messages, we learn from Barthes, are “that of my body, not that of my speech.”² Outside the banalities of dialogue a parallel discourse on love can be found in gestures, looks, sighs. Such elements are given spatio-temporal charge in Alain Guiraudie’s 2013 queer thriller *L'inconnu du lac*. The film plots desire and violence across a

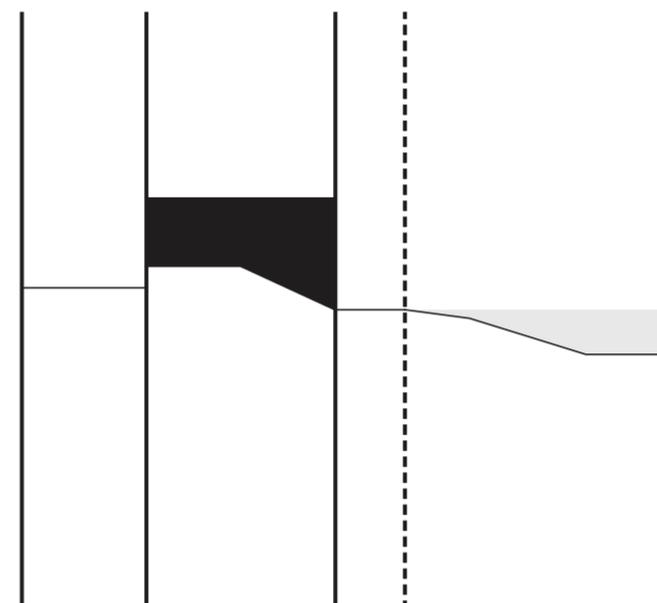
secluded lakefront where forms of interpersonal exchange are organized by means of site-specific locations.³ Cruising scenes privilege the male body and trajectories of the self over language, provoking characters to be read as abstract points and vectors. The representational mode evokes architectural theorist Stan Allen’s definition of “diagram” as a configuration of “momentary clusters of matter in space,” or a study of “potential relationships among elements.”⁴ Male bodies are figured on a continual search for the erotic subject, in flux, as matter en route to the next possible configuration or relationship.

Can a discourse on love be abstracted as diagram, a mathematical set of figures, positions, and trajectories? Further, can the diagram be viewed as a means of realizing new relationships and models, not simply as a representational tool to communicate existing ones? Such questions that approach an abstraction of desire and the potential therein can be tested through two underlying schemas in *L'inconnu du lac*. The first charts geographic position in relation to actions and affect, plotting boundary conditions and spatial sequences between four major environments in the film. The second focuses on the practice of cruising, defined here as an active search for erotic intimacy, framing bodies in relationship to speed, distance, and orientation. While the study uses *L'inconnu du lac* as a means to produce diagrammatic models, the end goal is not purely representational. The model’s potential within a discourse on love, and even more so within the context of queer desire, lies in its generative capacity. To decode an organizational logic behind sites labeled queer, other, or outside is to approach a method of production for alterative spatial and social narratives. As Deleuze has written, “[The diagram] never functions in order to represent a pre-existing world, it produces a new type of reality, a new model of truth.”⁵ Diagrams are not illustrations but abstract machines, capable of producing novel relationships of desire between site, activity, and matter.

Set on an isolated lakefront in Provence, *L'inconnu du lac* focuses on a summer cruising destination for queer men. The site



parking woods beach lake



sex
search
display
death

Queer *Carte de tendre*, plan (figure 1, above) and section (figure 2, below). Source: Diagram by author.

is located across from and in opposition to a heteronormative beach culture on the horizon, referred to simply as the “other side.” Isolation is visually enforced by the cinematic fetishization of natural light, in its ability to render human flesh, vegetation, and immersive shadows during the late afternoon—as well as the utter darkness that characterizes its absence after dusk. While dialogue references a distant urbanism, the world of the film is strictly contained by wilderness. Consciousness is bound to the limits of landscape. The lakefront, a counter site supported by a geographic and conceptual position outside of heteronormative bounds, facilitates queer desire and provides a setting to act on and out varying cues and stimuli. It is a public space that allows for the uninhibited interaction of strangers. Such actions exceed far beyond the narrow realm of homosexual sex to engage a conception of interpersonal relationships free from social constraints. Franck, the seasoned protagonist, believes the site enables him to find love, whereas for the object of his desire, Michel, being there is an opportunity to engage in acts of brutal violence. The film charts their relationship over several days. Amorous encounters, all bound to the lakefront, are interrupted by a series of traumatic events that destabilize the identities projected by the two men as well as the desire that drives them towards one another.

Theorist Lauren Berlant has noted the inherent instability of desire, a quality with transformative potential for both the individual and society at large.⁶ She interprets the idea that personal identity itself is a constructed falsehood, merely one of many possible representations of the self given expression for the sake of stability. This stability is rendered particularly important in settings of “hetero-sexualized sexual difference” where social norms seek legible hierarchies in relation to status and power. Thus, sites of difference and anonymity—in which the lakefront of *L'inconnu du lac* serves as one example—provide opportunity for personal reinvention. They are places where desire and identity merge and complicate one another to produce multiple new modes of being.

While operating as a queer site for desire and identity, the cruising landscape of *L'inconnu du lac* is ordered by means of geographically specific zones of bodily action and affect. The non-normative is governed by a strict set of internal rules. Divided into parking lot, woods, beach, and lake, each space is governed by a distinct logic and environment. The dirt parking lot is a site of arrival and departure, characterized by both the anticipatory joy of being united with the other and the melancholy sorrow of perpetual loss. The beach functions as a space of exposure and bodily display, but notably within the larger dynamic of cruising as a space of internalized desire. Distinguished by physical and verbal control, there is a sense of affected ennui in which one assesses all possibilities of sexual encounter only to act on them at a later time. The beachgoer's gaze is directed primarily to the lake, a zone that is imbued with a deep sentiment of fear. To enter the water entails exposure and risk, themes played out through a violent murder that occurs in the lake and a mythical fifteen-foot *silurus* rumoured to inhabit its depths. Sex acts are reserved for the woods where vegetation provides visual cover from both the beach and parking lot. There, trajectories of the male body are privileged over language, with speech reduced to banal greetings or eliminated completely. Desire is communicated through meeting the sustained gaze of the other.

One might consider the film a queer *Carte de tendre*, referencing Madeleine de Scudéry's seventeenth-century map of emotional transport. Scudéry's fictional geography is one of movement and traversal, characterized, as Giuliana Bruno has explored in her work on the cartographic form, as a schema that relates affect to place.⁷ In *L'inconnu du lac* natural boundary conditions are the primary means of organizing the act of cruising; despite the landscape setting and absence of formalized borders, it is the breaching of environmental thresholds that hold narrative significance. Environments that organize action and affect can be plotted in relation to one another to produce a diagram that links territory, emotion, and movement. By reconstructing the main spaces of the film as a series of zonal strips,



Figures 3–5: Film stills, *L'inconnu du lac*. Source: *L'inconnu du lac*. Dir. Alain Guiraudie. Les films du losange, 2013.

scenic relationships of part to whole become clear in terms of proportion and spatial sequence (Fig. 1). From the entry parking lot, visitors must pass through the woods to arrive at the beach. This passage is delivered in the film as a direct transition—though characters are in the wooded zone of cruising they do not engage in the act. The lakefront is controlled by a social regulation of sequence and space: one must park, cross to the beach, sunbathe and swim before re-entering the woods. Those who do not abide are labeled outcasts.⁸

In addition to planometric organization, height and elevation also structure narrative events. When a site-section is cut across the length of cinematic territory, from parking lot to lake,

the topographic relation between zones can be understood (Fig. 2). Height differentials have a direct relation to positions of surveillance and thus zoning and exposure of the body. When “l’homme du mardi soir” asks Franck, “Want to go higher up?” it indicates a distinction in elevation as to where the act of sex typically occurs.⁹ Scattered tissues, condoms, and cardboard packaging at their chosen location provide evidence of a popular secondary network of protected sites. In addition to privacy, a privileged elevation in the woods allows for surveillance of the beach and lake. It is from this vantage point, later in the film, that Franck is a witness to murder. From the cover of brush and high grass he watches Michel overpower a former

lover, drowning him in the lake at dusk. While the woods operate as a visually protected and internalized zone, once inside the gaze is able to penetrate outside of territorial bounds.

The planometric and sectional diagrams refigure the amorous search in *L'inconnu du lac* through a three-dimensional coordinate system organized by the position of bodies in space and the privileged act of surveillance. Far from being confined to the narrative structure of the film, this model of territorialized strips and affective zones can be used for the spatial organization of sites outside the realm of cinema. The sequence of environmental thresholds provides a structure for matter in space while supporting diverse relationships between elements. In addition, the abstract nature of the diagrams allows for a projection at varying scales of deployment, potentially realized through the architecture of a single room, building, complex, or city. This in turn provokes the development of parameters to be tested through prototype and experimentation, the details of which would lead far beyond the current text.

A thirty-second sequence at minute 18:45 offers another spatio-temporal model for analysis. The sequence is comprised of three distinct scenes, all without dialogue and featuring anonymous men in the woods (Figs. 3–5). The first is characterized by the absence of movement, composed of a five-second still shot. The round, lounging body of a single man is tightly framed, lying on one side with head in hand. Purple and yellow wildflowers partially obstruct his form. He is the embodiment of “anticruise,” assuming the same position and attitude of those on the beach. The scenes that follow are each twelve seconds in duration and depict the act of cruising within expansive natural settings. Formal pathways on the ground are not visible, leading to the inference that trajectories of the male body are motivated solely through nonverbal stimuli with adjacent players. Characters are readily abstracted into points, lines, and vectors, mediating between one another and the surrounding landscape. Scene two reveals the integral role of natural elements within the dynamic of cruising. Large trees are used for

protectionary distancing, both in cautionary approach and to block the other’s gaze when unwanted (Fig. 6). The third scene details a nuanced exchange between follower and leader based on speed, distance, and orientation. A man, conscious that he is being followed by another approximately twenty feet away, invites the erotic advance through simultaneous and opposite trajectories: while his body moves forward into increasingly dense foliage, his gaze looks backward to meet the eyes of the other.

Within the larger context of *L'inconnu du lac*, the wooded landscape operates as a world unto itself, an environment that can only be experienced in full through the act of cruising. It is here that Scudéry’s concept of “tender” geography as one that facilitates and enables the individual to traverse boundaries applies. The woods support interaction but do not control it, allowing for the generation of multiple and new relationships between players and site. Male bodies are figured in constant flux, as points on an itinerant path without beginning or end. For some, it is a dynamic repeated daily; however, the experience is not predetermined as it is for the other zones of *L'inconnu du lac*. Each time one enters the woods it is coupled with anticipation, fear, and desire of the unknown.

The diagram specific to the woods and the act of cruising is that of the “field condition,” defined as an accumulation of local connections that form a larger network. The repetition of elements and the serial nature of their interaction forms a recognizable system, but one that is not bound to an overarching geometry. Flocks of birds, herds of reindeer, and crowds in protest are examples of naturally occurring field conditions cited by Stan Allen, to which one may add the cruising bodies of *L'inconnu du lac*.¹⁰ Trajectories of the body and gaze are mediated at the scale of interpersonal dynamics to form a larger network or spatial matrix between players and site. This field condition is open to alterity, able to incorporate moments of indeterminacy and the incalculable while retaining the integrity of the system as a whole.¹¹ In this regard the diagrammatic form serves as a *mise en abyme* for *L'inconnu du lac*, a spatio-temporal model by which one can

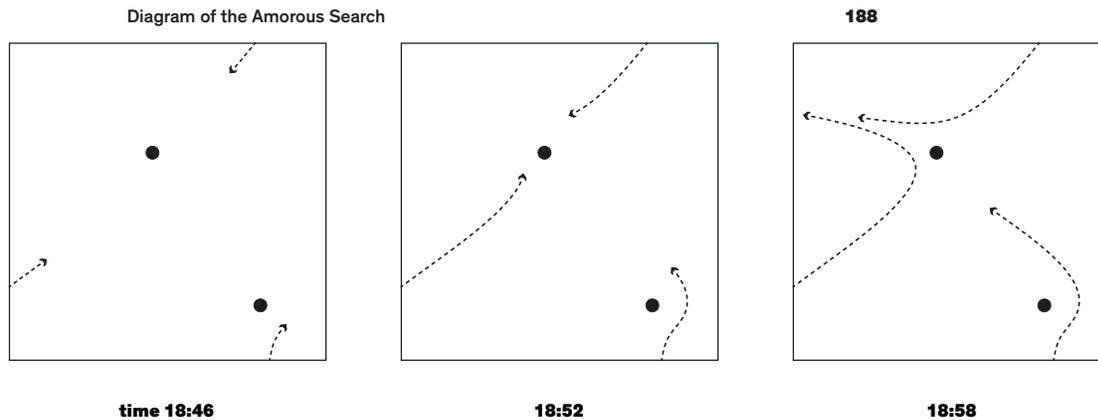


Figure 6: Cruising ground, *L'inconnu du lac* minute 18:46-18:58.
Source: Diagram by author.

understand the film as a whole. (And prompts the question of where else such a diagram might be found or generated—is there an architectural typology of desire?) The open, indeterminate nature of the diagram nurtures the amorous search and its varied outcomes—sex, betrayal, rejection, violence—at times forming an indelible link between love and counter-narratives of destruction.

The diagram's potential within a discourse on love and queer desire lies in its generative capacity. Diagrams have the ability to produce new modes of reality and, more importantly, provide a model for the construction of alternative spatial and social narratives. The models presented, situated in *L'inconnu du lac* but not bound to the realm of cinema, offer a narrative approach one may deem ephemeral, fleeting, or, even, cinematic—a means to figure the bodily signs so important to Barthes and the trajectories they compose, the unfolding of points and space in a perpetual state of becoming.

1
Thank you to Eugenie Brinkema for her insight and encouragement throughout the development of this text.

2
Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 44, 182.

3
L'inconnu du lac (Stranger by the Lake), dir. Alain Guiraudie (Les films du losange, 2013).

4
Stan Allen, "Diagrams Matter," *ANY: Architecture New York* 23 (1998): 16–19.

5
Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, ed. and trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1988), 43.

6
Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (New York: Dead Letter Office, BABEL Working Group, 2012), 52.

7
Giuliana Bruno, "An Atlas of Emotions," *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London: Verso, 2007), 208, 223.

8
Theorist Tom Conley notes the spatial mapping of cinema mediates between the visible and discursive, bringing forward "the rifts and overlappings of things seen and things said." Constructing such a map requires the author to account for gaps. This

mediation alone separates the practice from the realm of pure representation and provides a distinction between illustration and generative model. See: Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 11.

9
The character name "l'homme du mardi soir" translates directly to "the man from Tuesday night," a reference to both the anonymity and frequency of sexual exchange at the lakefront.

10
Allen further describes the field condition as a "bottom-up phenomena, defined not by overarching geometrical schemas but by intricate local connections. [...] Form matters, but not so much the forms of things as the forms between things." Stan Allen, "Field Conditions," in *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 92.

11
An underlying organization of queer space—the concept of cruising as both activity and condition—gains further relevance in light of and counter to claims by John Paul Ricco that cruising grounds are "unmappable" sites precisely due to their proclivity to indeterminate paths and actions. See John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 11.