

Do Narratives Matter?

Are Narratives Matter?

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Abstract

Narratives—public and private are the stuff of design. This commonplace truism is often forgotten in the buzz, boom and confusion surrounding the development of digital media; digital media seem to offer a “virtual” alternative to such stuff; as such, the current Romance with Digital Media is nothing but a weak revival of primitive mentalism.

Narrative Composition

Narratives—public and private are the stuff of design. Written, verbal, and graphic, narratives cross artistic boundaries to define creative vision. While all narratives are compositions, all compositions are not narratives; uniqueness ascribed by narrative, composition is embedded in its process of construction--performance composed in time. Time, is the common constructive thread of performance, contributing dimensional awareness through scripted authorship: coordinated, articulated, and defined compositional actions.

What is a narrative? A narrative is a story transmitted. In a very general sense, it is a story told. The willing suspension of disbelief makes it possible for the story to cohere without the constraints of “reality”. Like any story, just about any narrative will have the explicit or implicit structure: beginning-end-middle. Again, like any story, the narrative will have embedded in it the explicit or implicit voice of a speaker, which then provides the point of view—the narrator. These elements are almost always found in any story—but their lack does not necessarily invalidate the idea that a tale has been told or rather transmitted. The medium matters—but it is a story, even if there are no words in it—and even (or especially) if there are no words possible to paraphrase it.

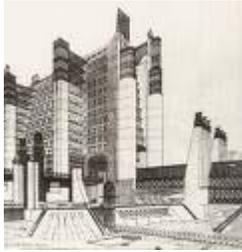
Architecture deals with stories told by dwellings.

As dwellings reverberate with the narratives of their creation, their curators ponder the time before the “big bang”. That secret however is secure from detection in the realm of knowledge occupied by the narrative; the dimension occupied by all things imagined. While the mechanics of creation (of form and space) may be the obsession of the seeker, the truth, is forever concealed from post-creation logical deduction.

Cubism and Futurism

Goethe had ascribed the temporal metaphor in architecture “(it) is **as** frozen music,” however the commonplace application of the temporal narrative in the design process is predominantly a twentieth-century phenomenon. Formal variations are

defined early on in Corbusier's "Purism" and Wright's "organic architecture" and Sant'Elia's power stations.



Cubism is at the fulcrum of narrative awareness in the modern era; the narratives of Picasso and Braque in 1906, through selective dimensional negation of the pictorial, free up partial dimensional channels to introduce the temporal – to script temporal symbolic narratives reconstructed with "silly little cubes". Notably, the mechanics of cubist temporal narration heralded and foreshadowed of related upheavals in science and other forms of rational discourse.

The Italian Futurists spin this temporality into a Romance with the Synthetic—again foreshadowing The Age of Synthetics. Synthetics are toxic imitations of originals, the toxicities of which are not evident until the consequences of consuming the toxin become irreversible. This is the Romance with the Power Plant—you See the energy that is cheaper and cleaner than horsepower--but you can't see the cancer—thus Marinetti, Sant'Elia and others.

The surreal

The constraints of "reality" become lifted in art with Surrealism—let's simply stutter, say: Dali and DaDa. Here the irrationality of dreams enters and distorts time, chronology, and narrative voice and structure. In architecture Moholy-Nagy could be thought of as an exemplar.

The Virtual

With PopArt the idea that in the age of mechanical duplication we have reached a state where copies are superior to originals becomes a kind of dogma. This is the apotheosis of the romance with the synthetic and where theorists of virtual architecture remain stuck to this here day. Here, nylon is revealed—or let us say was revered—as purer than silk. The toxicity of nylon itself in the final apotheosis becomes a kind of Apocalyptic Positive.

Here too the Romance with the immaterial reaches co-apotheosis. The narrative runs aground as purely self-referential. The virtual becomes identified with the mental—the immaterial essence beloved of the Hellenists. She is the ghost coming back to haunt us in her last haunt: The Virtual.

Experience repossessed

Oddly, perhaps, it is architecture rather than the other High Arts which first foretells of The End of the Affair with synthetics: Wright's Guggenheim as The House of Art—followed by Kahn's Kimball as its vault, and Linn's Big Book as its dirge, ring the death knell of nylon—as much as The Titans of titanium still sold(i)er on bravely against the flood. Wright's Guggenheim, the Kimball and the 'Nam Mem' are pure narratives embedded in time. They brought about Green And Whole foods—partly

synthetic as they may be—yet whispering of “wind power” and fluttering silk kerchiefs.

Digital Negation of Narrative Structure

In its primal essence, a narrative is an enactment, not a spiritual or mental representation, even if it is suppressed or even at times somewhat implicit; a narrative that is not an enactment is not a narrative, it is not even the ghost of a narrative—it is a Platonist or Neo-Platonist wishdream—it is what someone totally alienated from their own experience would want a wishdream to be were it the case that the “wishes” (understood as mental phenomena rather than as enactments) that you dream (understood as mental phenomena rather than as enactments) could come true.

A story told is not merely ink on paper. As the story infolds and unfolds and unfolds; teller and hearer participate in synesthetic sensations and implicit actions—enactments, performances. Such “images” are not the ghosts of sensations.

From the cubists through the age of Pop and Post-Pop the hidden agenda was to substitute “mind” for “soul”—this synthetic, thoroughly modern creation—the mind—was then believed to be superior to The Soul.

There may be a ghost in the machine—but if he is there, he is made of stuff—there is no ghost in any machine that is utterly immaterial. Thus, “virtual” environments, “virtual” media, “virtual” design, identify phenomena that are the unfortunate legacy of Hellenism. The Hellenistic preoccupation with “origin” as bereft of polluting matter is the Spirit or Soul we inherit from the Apostle Paul. This distortion of reality and of experience is the direct great-grandfather of the notion: VIRTUAL. It is a return to a primitive mentalism: thus, the current Romance with Digital Media is nothing but a weak revival of primitive mentalism. So, what’s the matter with “virtual” “environments”?--they’re really no matter at all—or even worse—they only matter in that they distract us from what matters—narratives.

In The Narrative (as let us say in The Guggenheim, or the Kimball, or the ‘Nam Mem’) the physical enactment supervenes its virtual representation. It is the beginning of the end of The Virtual and the End of The Beginning of repossessing experience—repossessing the narrative—repossessing architecture.

The printing ink and electronic vibration spilled and wasted on discussions of “The Virtual Designer” is a feeble and futile whimper of a last stand for Soul—understood hellenistically as essence removed or distilled or primary from matter. It is a sad and pitiable attempt to mechanize the soul, denying architecture its role (and soul) as the performance, determined or patterned by a set of instructions and validated and proven by the structured enactment of the narrative.

The Ghosts’ Last Stand

In 1989 the Iron Curtain collapses and AutoCAD manifests. Here, the narrative is being dictated by the ghost in the machine. The End. In 1989 the narrative is no longer able to be written by The Author—it is dictated to the computer scribe. It signals the end of the architect being able to articulate and edit the narrative of the hand drawing. There is a continual progression of this encroachment by technology that further removed the author from the compositional tactics of creation.

“The Story of AutoCAD” is that it is simply a cheap toxic substitute for the original. It’s not better—it is merely cheaper—and highly toxic. Nylon = cheap toxic silk. At this point we have an admission of defeat and at least an implicit sense of inferiority. It is indeed The End of the Affair. The idea of the automated creative artists—finally—may have sold on Wall Street—but is not doing well on Main Street. Flash Gordon’s Last Stand.

Draw!

At its best it is anonymous design-build that is the antithesis of these ghosts—here the building returns to the ideal of enactment—without drawings-as-such much less—simulations.

Narratives and Matter

We alter the future with narratives—written, graphic, verbal, multisensory, synesthetic. These can be abstractions like the recording of a thought in the present (like an instruction) which will affect the future. This is like a deed, a promise, a ManiMephist(g)o. A contemporary analysis of narratives begins by asking: what is the nature of this bequest or legacy? —is it matter, does it matter? (Is time therefore an illusion?) (What IS the future of this illusion?)

In this sense the instructions that constitute a deed transcend matter—which however does not make such instructions “virtual”. The questions about the transcendent quality of instructions take us directly to the questions surrounding perception, questions like: are thoughts in the present capable of transcending matter? Or are thoughts from the past, the future, or some alternate reality transcending the present, “a radio beacon effect”? Questions of magic, wizardry and religion: wizardry in man-made whereas magic is natural; in the man-made world duplicates exist—in nature they do not; thus human creations, duplicates, are a revolt against nature. Hallucinations, the counterpoint to the “sane” narrative, surround drug states, head trauma, or visions (e.g. of the Blessed Virgin Mary). Traditional Psychiatry wouldn’t differentiate between these—but they are different, and oddly enough, contemporary Psychiatry differentiates between Hallucinations and Visions – structured narratives of place and being.

Issues surrounding, active and passive, take us to questions surrounding imagining and memory. Memory and imagining: where do dreams and narratives come from? Is there such a thing as an original thought? How is this related to the necessity of forgetfulness and imperfection? Yet, the score survives.

Structured Narratives of Place

As we have said, Goethe made the observation that “architecture is as frozen music;” he identifies architecture as performance, it is an art in that it is temporal (like music) but “moves more slowly.” Although of course, the process of decomposition in architecture is merely slowed to a crawl. While architecture is more like a frozen ritual than it is like frozen music, both engage the compositional techniques of layered narratives (duration and speed), and structured symbolic language.

The space between is the clearinghouse for all things real and imagined, where facts and dreams are reassembled in the Surreal Freudian dimension of legends and survival, the land of fairytales and faith, of hunger and desire where all things function without the constraints of absolute logic of the law of the excluded middle.

All things real and imagined are synthesized in synesthetic-kaleidoscopic-zoetropic assemblages where syllogistic logic is seduced.

Of course, faith and belief are necessary to the survival of the species. How would it be possible to live with the reality of death staring us in the face at every moment? What if dreams were not forgotten and memories not repressed? What if perversion and not “normal” desire were unleashed? Is our survival not dependent on the denial of reality and the synthesis of the imagined, idealism sheltered from actuality? Faith is the “logical explanation” of the space between, the place occupied by what is imagined and that which is known - the realm of the dream maker.

Narrative Architecture, Flesh and Dwelling

In the narrative the deed becomes flesh and dwells among us—or rather in architectural design it becomes our Dwelling Place. It is the cover we need for separation from nature (Wizadry over Magic). Wizadry as legerdemain separates us from the magic participatory and time-less narrative of nature. We fall into Wizadry from Magic. At its best then architecture is a form of wizadry—it is a recipe for legerdemain, a slight-of-hand performance of the trick (or art). Yet—where does the trick itself come from? What is the Origin of Tricks?

Here, we are in the realm of imagining and memory properly so called, we are beyond and through the doors of perception into the realm of the transcendent (not the mental—not the spiritual). The dream, not understood as mental phenomenon but rather as a suppressed enactment, comes, well, from The Future—since it cannot come from either the present or the past. The Miller of RepoMan was right: there has to have been a Time Before—and before, there was not what there is now. Thus, change comes from the future. We repossess the dream; it’s a Chevy Malibu (not a stainless steel DeLorean), it’s a time machine. The original thought is the radio signal from The Future. It is matter. It matters.

The deed then does not turn us into puppets or mechanical robots. We are flesh and we are blood and we are bones. The illusion of the soul should not be exchanged for the illusion of a mechanized soul or a mechanical man. The response to mentalism or dualism is neither simplistic monism nor simplistic materialism and Virtual Environments share the worst of both of those impossible worlds. A narrative in time—on the contrary, recovers the flesh of the dwelling place.

Beacons, Transcending Matter

When Beethoven dies his score survives; when The Imperial Hotel is demolished its score survives. The performance survives by transcending temporal restraints; the persistent memory of the narrative is residual. After all, art is what we have left of The Sacred in a Secular World.

Notably, narratives only exist and persist in a flat world (the cubist dilemma); if you imagine the world to be round, burdening narrative intention with extraneous dimensionality, its narratives disappear to be replaced by Celebrity Talk – “Romance with Digital Media.”

