

CURRENT CONFLUENCES: ARCHITECTURE, NARRATIVE, MUSIC AND FILM

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INTRODUCTION: "MEDIO" AND PLATO'S CAVE

A few years ago at a symposium held by the Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies the noted architect Yujiro Nakamura posed a simple question: What is a city? Postulating that there are basically two poles or conditions, namely the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm

(the human self) he identified the city as a mediocosm: an extension and redefinition of the term "medio" from the Latin "medius" or middle, implying that which intermediates and not simply something in between.¹

The notion of "medio" suggests communicative actions, constructs or images that convey new meanings through the juxtaposition of relationships. Such relationships—the spatial or temporal attributes of objects, places, personages, ideas, etc. involve acts of reception and response through mediation. This implies the receptor's ability to distinguish between the appearance of things and its reality and meaning, as well as his subsequent responses to the mediator's intentions. For the film director Michelangelo Antonioni the issue of appearance remained suspect. "I always mistrust everything which I see which an image shows me, because I imagine what is beyond it. And what is beyond an image cannot be known."²

Plato concerned himself, among other matters with similar issues. In his work " The Republic" he introduced the simile of the cave that represented man's epistemological and ontological predicament. Men, fettered since childhood in a dark cave observe on a distant wall an illuminated parade of projected artifacts... silhouettes of men, animals, ordinary domestic objects, etc. manipulated by concealed guardian carriers accompanied occasionally by voices appropriate to the images. At one point in the story one of the prisoners escapes, apprehends the real world outside and eventually returns to the cave to persuade his fellow prisoners that they have been deluded. His observations are of course, derisively received as preposterous.³

For Plato, resolving the question of appearance versus reality relied not on the oppressive guardian carriers' images, but rather the perceived realities of a few enlightened individuals. Today's enlightened individuals may be found not isolated in the cave, but collectively confronting the cathode ray tube "the very space of habitation that is conceived as both receiver and distributor, as the space of both reception and operations, the control screen and terminal which as such may be endowed with telematic power - that is, with the capability of regulating everything..."⁴ For Nigel Coates this means that "In fact, we have adopted the artificial in place of the real, and learned to make use of this new "reality"... The old cultural compartments, patterns and processes have been deprogrammed from the constraints of a manufacturing based society toward one which manipulates excess." Furthermore... "architects have remained strangely isolated from these changes... The fact is that the way we live has changed for good, and architecture must respond with a thorough rethink."⁵ This suggests that we need to re-examine the discipline as part of a larger "medio" landscape invoking new processes, design strategies and disciplines in the making of architecture.

CONFLUENCES

Such a "medio" landscape was addressed by students of the Graduate School of Architecture in an experimental studio which was conducted through the confluence of four disciplines, namely narrative fiction, music, film and architecture. In this paper I would like to discuss both the theoretical issues pertaining to these disciplines as well as their applications within the studio.

Rejecting commonly held analogies between these disciplines in the form of what Steven Holl has called "overwrought ...comparisons along narrow channels of interaction: number, rhythm, notation and proportion,"⁶ I sought, instead, new landscapes by exploring their inherent "structural" principles.

These began by acknowledging a fundamental distinction that exists between the disciplines namely, diachronic versus synchronic relationships. Diachronic relationships involve spatial changes and transformations through the medium of time. As such they may be found in music, film and in certain literary forms, such as the *Bildungsroman*, the picture novel. Conversely synchronic relationships reflect structurally static spatial conditions which architecture inhabits. Numerous theoretical investigations have postulated the unification of these antithetical relationships.

Gianmarco Vergani has commented on the reduction of music to its architectonic dimensions, namely "a synchronic structure governed by mathematics" from which..."structural relationships are then extracted from music and applied to architecture."⁷ Conversely, architecture may be perceived diachronically through " a relativistic reversal of positions where the observer is required to move in order to "set" the architectural composition " in motion".⁸ Further attempts at unification through a diachronic mode were explored in early German cinema often referred to as "pure., abstract., absolute... or intended..."⁹ by such artists as Viking Eggeling (*Diagonal Symphony*) and Oskar Fischinger (*Study #6*).

Viking Eggeling, *Diagonal Symphony*

"Synesthesia (sic)," "the transposition of sensory images from one modality to another"¹⁰ (i.e. sight to sound) introduced at the beginning of the Enlightenment provides a contrasting model. Within the German Romantic School the notion of synesthesia suggested "associations between the *qualities* of different art forms"¹¹ that resulted in the concept of "frozen music" which Goethe and others developed further.

Within the studio the notion of unification was observed more as a confluence of the various disciplines. Although individually each possessed inherent structural characteristics and traits collectively they revealed several parallel relationships. I would like to elaborate, at this point on the nature of these characteristics as they were explored in several studio studies that included: lectures and readings in narrative fiction and music, a video practicum, site readings through video documentation, architectonic interventions and integration, and video presentations. The experimental nature of the studio suggested that the students view the format as only an indication of intention and that the final outcome was to remain flexible, perhaps even inconclusive.

PROCESSES

Narrative fiction, as a basis for initiating the site readings provided two contrasting structures: the traditional novel (*bildungsroman*) versus the spatial novel. The traditional novel relies on causality and movement toward a conclusion. Its structure therefore is linearly sequential, relying on temporality and often, manipulation. Based on a reading of Maupassant's short story, "Moonlight" the students were asked to investigate questions of entry and development within the story: how and where they entered; when the actual action began, how the narrator moved from one action or event to another and finally, how the story concluded.

Conversely the spatial novel minimizes the temporal, relying instead on action that moves inward. It is repetitious and reflexive. It engages in

"transmuting the time world of history into the timeless world of myth.¹² Examples of this type of narrative were to be found, for example, in reading Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room" in which a painting is "read" as a series of events...imagined experiences within the canvas room. For Robbe-Grillet the narrative's structure is "an attempt to construct a purely mental space and time - those of dreams, perhaps, or of memory..."¹³ Architecturally this may be translated into the labyrinth (also the title of a Borges work addressing similar issues), the maze or other claustrophobic or undefinable settings.

Both of these structures were explored in the next study a series of site readings. [As will be observed later, many of the students placed greater emphasis on notions of causality, movement and narrative structure as reflected in the traditional novel.] Story and plot were also introduced as part of the study. The means by which the plot is developed depends in part on the story itself which was generated through an investigation of actual sites indigenous to the Wasatch Front, i.e., the Salt Lake Valley. Contrasting sites were chosen as settings for the site readings that partially included industrial ruins, a dense urban street and alley, a cemetery and a park adjacent to the mountains. These suggested dialectical relationships between landscape and the city.

For Michelangelo Antonioni such dialectical relationships postulated the polarity of man's own condition. Driven from nature through the Fall, man lost touch with his true sentiments. A desire to return to this lost Eden is often found, for example in Antonioni's use of the desert as a primordial Eden. (*Il deserto rosso*). Contrastingly, the city becomes a place of potential violence and psychological isolation (*La Notte*). Occasionally these polarities are reversed: the city as an acadian retreat in contrast to the landscape as a setting for violence. (*Blow-Up*)

By transposing the structural principles from the earlier narrative readings the students were encouraged to explore several issues in examining the sites. These included the nature of entry, sequential and temporal development versus spatiality, characterization (discussed later in this paper) through tectonic details of surface, light, sound, etc. and a means of conclusion. Sites were also viewed as origins for narrative, music and drama. An abandoned concrete plant, for example, provided the subsequent setting for an apocalyptic myth; street facades masking inner worlds were ultimately revealed within the recesses of an alley; an historic street was further explored through musical scoring.

Orchestrated on the basis of film storyboards and documented using video cameras, the readings suggested that the sites themselves began to tell their own tales as both story and plot: the story - the action itself, following chronological events; the plot - how the reader learns of the action. The latter involves the author's intervention in orchestrating the events.

REGIONS OF CONFLUENCE

To assist the students in observing the relationships between disciplines, an examination of parallel ordering principles was introduced. These principles may be divided into four confluential regions: narrative elements, continuity, characterization and composition.

Narrative elements. Narrative elements consist of the characters, settings, causal agents and actions within spatial and temporal modes. In narrative fiction introduction of the characters and a setting anticipates the action which may be initiated either externally (a catastrophe, a war, etc.) or internally within the character (a desire to want something).

Architecture may likewise be used to represent characters, causal agents or settings. The dialectical relationship between an architectural setting and the characters may be seen for example, in Orson Welles' film "Citizen Kane". The enormous edifice Xanadu becomes the architectural embodiment of Kane's changing personality and relationship. The grotesque scale of the chambers suggests the unbreachable gap between an isolated Kane and his growing inaccessibility to the world outside. The mansion, a repository of memories and artifacts also suggests through its vast impersonal spaces the "terrible emptiness at the heart of Kane."¹⁴

The building as a repository of memories provided the setting for one of the studio studies. An abandoned concrete plant's vast chamber was transformed into a theatre within which survivors of a nuclear holocaust could re-enact past events. The stage, based on Noh theatre principles, consisted of three elements: a front stage representing the present, real world; a transitional bridge and the rear stage - cylindrical elements in which memories, icons and objects of a remembered past resided.

Jean Louis Loveridge, *Untitled*

In another study architecture as a causal agent was addressed through the introduction of an existing site element. A viaduct roadway (the causal agent) was read as a barrier thereby generating elements that reinforced the theme: real or imagined barriers, fences, walls and inaccessible structures conveying both societal and self-imposed separation. The figural qualities of an old mill provided a third model, architecture as character. Within a vacuous valley setting the mill as a singular object created a spatial dialogue with other architectonic elements superimposed by the student on the site.

Continuity The second region involves the temporal ordering of spatial events. The story - the action itself, unfolds through chronological time: event A followed by events B,C,D etc., providing a predictable pattern. Spatial sequences such as enfilades, spaces aligned to a common axis or datum, i.e. Egyptian temples, medieval cathedrals, etc. illustrate this often ritualized movement toward some kind of termination or completion.

Plot - how one learns of the action, involves manipulation of both events and time by the author. This may follow several patterns that often challenge the traditional sequences of beginning, middle and end. The conclusion of an event may often be introduced at the very beginning of the story (death, a murder, a journey's end). The remainder of the story involves a series of commentaries or reflections regarding the event. These may be experienced in the form of flashbacks, memories, etc. Orson Welles used many of these strategies in "Citizen Kane" by introducing at the film's beginning the death of the central character. The remainder of the film examines Kane's life through flashback images from various vantage points via the colleagues who knew him.

The inversion of the flashback introduces notions of anticipation or premonition through the flash forward. Less frequently used in film it nevertheless often appears in architecture. The facade of a building may announce certain spatial events prior to their temporal and spatial experience. Certain elements may also reappear through repetition and/or scale transformation suggesting both anticipation and the flashback as memory. In other words the facade may be read as both a text and filmic event. This may be seen in both the facade and interior of Sant'Andrea in Mantua by Alberti in which a triumphal arch / barrel vault superimposed on a temple front announces the interior motif with its great central vaulted nave and cross axis' of alternating bays.

Time may also be experienced as "real," compressed or expanded. Real time obviously refers to the unfolding of events within a chronological actual time. Compressed time involves condensation, i.e. the notion of fast motion, a popular strategy in silent film chase scenes. Expanded time involves an elongation of experiences. Sergei Eisenstein utilized this strategy in the film "Potemkin" in the Odessa Steps sequence, a confrontation between the Czar's troops and the citizens of Odessa, the site of an actual massacre a few years earlier. Through the use of montage (which will be discussed later) he purposely elongated the actual experience (for aesthetic as well as political reasons) in a series of juxtaposed images that involved contrasting movements and viewpoints.

Elongation was explored in one studio project through the introduction of an architectonic element, a time portal that provided a transition between two conditions: the public nature of a street facade versus the private nature of an adjacent alley. Through a compression of spatial

planes and diminishing apertures that decreased the light intensity the portal's structure provided the cumulative paradoxical effect of spatial compression and temporal elongation. A series of fire stairs, likewise provided the setting for both compression through the accelerated movement of light and shadow in one event, and elongation through repetitious camera movements in a subsequent event. Both of these time interventions postulated the distinction between surface appearance, *vis a vis* the street and the introspective reality of the alley.

Mahrdad Samie, *Ricochet*

Continuity also involves the notion of "bridging": the connection which occurs between scenes or events. Several strategies are involved including the dissolve whereby one event visually blends into its successor. Architecturally this may be achieved through transparency, ambiguity and simultaneity, the overlap of adjacent spatial territories or events, a strategy often used by Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies in espousing the modernist space - time position.

Cutting involves the juxtaposition of one event moving directly to its successor. The movement may involve either a gap (a lapse in space or time) or a direct cut. The latter was pursued by Eisenstein initially through the concept of the pictogram or ideogram which is based on Japanese hieroglyphs. In the ideogram two dissimilar objects such as water and the eye, for example when read simultaneously provide a new meaning or concept, in this case weeping or sorrow. Extending this further he postulated the concept of dialectic montage - conflicting or dissimilar events that suggested through their confluence entirely new meanings: thesis versus antithesis equalling synthesis. Based on the concept of the shot (a piece of an event) as a "montage cell" he defined five categories of montage (cemented shots): metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtonal and intellectual. Collectively they postulated a reconstructed view of reality- the cinematic means by which to fulfill certain aesthetic (and political) ends. This "defamiliarization" stance has been espoused through the conflated imagery of recent "deconstructivist" practitioners.

The concept of rhythmic and tonal montage was pursued by one of the students through the juxtaposition of a musical score by Phillip Glass ("Cloud Scape") with an historic streetscape. [The superimposition of audio structures on a visual score is not a new phenomenon. Eisenstein, in collaboration with Serge Prokofieff in the film "Alexander Nevsky" produced a spatial/audio structural relationship between the musical score and the filmic images.]

The street was initially read as a traditional musical score. The various street and building elements were assigned musical attributes: fenestrations = pitch; width of facades = duration; public buildings = counterpoint, etc. Audially superimposing Glass' score over the visual streetscape the student soon discovered alternative, often contradictory readings. On the one hand the minimalist score provided repetitious rhythms and pitches in juxtaposition to the multivalent street facades. On the other hand significant historic buildings provided repetitious pedal notes that reinforced the bass modality of the score. At the same time, in response to the slight modulations within the score, architectural counterpoint themes *vis a vis* adjacent monumental structures were superimposed creating another juxtaposition or montage event. Finally, respecting the linear nature of both the score and street a musical coda, in the form of a repeat, was introduced. This involved the transfer of previous street facade themes into the open spaces, interpreted as musical "rests" at the end of the street. The resulting video tape suggested through this dialectical relationship new readings and alternative strategies regarding an understanding of the city street. It also introduced a specific point of view, namely that of the author as mediator.

Dan Christensen, *Site Readings*

Characterization Points of view also involve the notion of characterization. In narrative fiction characters occupy pivotal roles as agents of action or reflection. The character may be identified by certain traits which may appear through actions that are routine and therefore habitual and unchanging (Hamlet's habitual contemplation of potential acts) or non routine and dynamic. Other traits may appear in various forms of speech, external appearance, the environment or by analogy. Architecture's involvement often occurs through environmental traits: a symbiotic relationship between setting and character. The House of Usher "an appellation which seemed to include in the minds of the peasantry who used it both the family and the family mansion"..." a mansion of gloom"¹⁵ reflects its occupant's physiognomy: "... the now ghastly pallor of the skin and the now miraculous lustre of the eye..."¹⁶ Architecture also appears by analogy in many of Antonioni's films. In "The Passenger" a scene set in Bloomsbury Center provides a commentary on the character's paradoxical situation. Modern concrete buildings as figural elements viewed against the ground of existing brick structures suggest that the character, Locke is incapable of escaping his previous habits and identity.

These examples were addressed in a studio study through the dialectic between the building as character and a park as setting. The building's inaccessibility (an extension of the barrier theme noted earlier in this same project) was translated within the park as a fenced structure replicating its former self. Paradoxically the park, an acadian wilderness presented a similar barrier: a socially ostracized "public" place transformed *vis a vis* an enormous park bench into a prison... the original building itself.

Characters may also be presented either directly by the narrator as an authoritative observer (the narrator in Poe's " The Fall of the House of Usher") or indirectly through the observation of other characters within the story. In film this occurs through either the subjective viewpoint (the observer as participant) or objective viewpoint (the observer outside the event). These contrasting viewpoints both suggest spatiality: the relationship between the narrator or observer and the character or event.

Cinematographic principles, through placement of the camera (and therefore the observer) reinforce both involvement through the close-up shot or detachment through the long shot. Furthermore, reverse relationships may be established between the observer and the character or event depending on the point of view. A high camera view places the observer in a position of superiority relative to the character or event below. It also conveys one aspect of a figure/ground relationship by emphasizing in this case, the ground. In contrast the low camera view emphasizes the character's importance thereby placing the observer in a subordinate position. At the same time it also utilizes an alternative figure/ground relationship by emphasizing the sky or interior ceiling as a new ground.

John Ford recognized these relationships as characterizations of psychological as well as physical space in the film "Stagecoach." By emphasizing through low shots either the enormous expanse of the exterior sky or the interior compressive nature of the ceiling he also suggested further paradoxes: the freedom of external space and its concomitant dangers versus the security of enclosure that also conveys confinement.

Basing his study on the above film one of the students portrayed his site, a series of trails at the edge of the city and his architectonic interventions as transformations of these qualities. At the same time he explored confrontational aspects of the story as revealed in the various characters'

traits. The architectonic elements, like the characters, formed either alliances or adversarial relationships. Screen walls and platforms reinforcing the trails acknowledged both enclosure and transparency: an architectonic mediation between both the expansiveness and intimacy of the site. At the same time an adjacent housing subdivision, the adversary encroaching upon the site was recorded only as a documentary event. Unlike the film no cinematic or architectonic conclusions were presented regarding the inevitable confrontation.

Composition Henri Cartier-Bresson once referred to the still photograph as the "pregnant moment." analogously implying the notion of potentiality. Transformed into cinema as the framed view (in music, the phrase) the resulting visual (or audio) image allows the observer an

opportunity to examine formal and compositional issues relative to the frame itself as a point of reference as well as its relationship to both preceding and subsequent views.

Within the frame compositional elements such as line, form and mass predominate either abstractly or representationally. The early experimental films emanating from Germany in the 1920's suggest transformations from anthropomorphic representation to geometric abstraction expressed as mathematical, mechanical or rhythmic movements. (Walter Ruttmann's "Opus III & IV") This pursuit of the abstract reflects cinematic responses to a correlation between the earlier Cubist notions of changing singular views relative to the artist's perceptions versus Futurism which glorified movement in the object (as well as political postures).

[Parenthetically, In music the same process has often occurred as evidenced in the shift from pictorial romanticism (the tone poem) to abstraction (Schönberg's atonal system) and minimalism (Phillip Glass, Steven Reich, etc.)]

Conversely, figural representation has dominated most subsequent cinematic positions. Cinematic representation has relied on two schools: image through montage versus realism. Formal relationships between line, form and mass may be observed through (1) the theory of image representation: mediation *vis a vis* events orchestrated by the director as we observed in Eisenstein's montage theories; and (2) the theory of *mise en scène* in which a continuous view of the action emphasizes realism through perspectival depth ("deep focus") and "real" time.

Both of these representational systems convey meaning not only through action, but also, in the framed view, through geometric relationships. Lines provide either contours in space or imagined movement: horizontal or vertical lines as implied extensions beyond the visual frame of reference; diagonal lines as indicators of recession or advancement as well as conveyors of motion or conflict/instability. Numerous examples of these formal elements may be found in the studio studies (i.e. frames distilled from specific sequences: alley, concrete plant, park, etc.)

These formal elements afford the possibility of either reinforcement or conflict through juxtaposition. [The latter, as we have seen was incorporated by Eisenstein in several films supporting his theory of dialectic montage.] A character's eyes or gestures may also create imaginary lines beyond the frame of reference or else implied forms within the frame that interact with either an object or another character

[the paradoxical embracing and confining gestures of a statue ("the Church") surrounding the young Guido in Fellini's "8 1/2"].

Triangulation (a quintessential compositional strategy in Late Medieval and Renaissance paintings) further suggests either stability and dominance or instability and subordination. This may be seen in two contrasting views from "Citizen Kane" in which Kane moves from a background subordinate position to the foreground thereby establishing his dominance.

Composition also involves both external and internal structures. In narrative fiction an external structure, the holistic framework of the story, may reflect certain spatial characteristics such as symmetry, for example. In symmetry the conditions placed upon the reader at the beginning are resolved through development of the characters or events such that the conclusion of the story suggests a reciprocal, but often altered relationship to its beginning: improvement of one character vs. the deterioration of another; relationships of equilibrium versus disequilibrium; factual events versus fictive myths. Conversely internal structures represent the details: characters and their traits, the settings, catalysts and the ensuing actions which support the external structure of the story.

These complimentary structures were further explored and interpreted by one of the students through scale transformations. Initially the observer was introduced to abstract geometric relationships through a series of visual frames: repetitious horizontal and vertical grid formations superimposed on a desolate landscape, a universe devoid of scale or meaning. Subsequent frames revealed however, through scaling a transformation from the abstract to the representational... the desolate landscape as a necropolis. Within this new set of references, compositional attributes acquired new meanings. The neutrality of the horizontal grids dissolved into the recognizable rectilinear reality of the grave. The tower, analogous to the grave's stone marker suggested, like Calvino's invisible city, "Baucis", a place to contemplate the shadows, the void, and the absence of self.

Karen Nickel, *From Behind*

CLOSURE VERSUS NON CLOSURE?

The completion of a story, film or musical event postulates two possibilities: closure versus non-closure. Closure provides a definitive conclusion... the ubiquitous "The End" within which the events and characters have exhausted all further possibilities of progression. Conversely, and apropos to our present cultural condition non-closure conveys incompleteness, ambiguity and inconclusive conclusions.

This experimental studio purposely selected the latter. Confronted with the traditional architectural studio and its predictable accoutrements I chose instead, alternative, albeit experimental open-ended channels. The confluence of alternative disciplines representing other values and interests of a society in incredible flux required both my attention and participation. Their inclusion suggested, as Baudrillard once observed, that"we are no longer a partner in the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication." 17

As a postscript this also suggests for Baudrillard that such an ecstasy is really a communication of successive obscenities. That remains however, the subject of another paper.

END NOTES

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