

THE VASULKAS

Toward a Non-Centric Narrative Space

There is a certain uneasiness about things to come — about the “new” things we must endure. With no demand nor pressure, no request for cooperation, the new comes of its own. One feels as if evolution is an automatic process — driven by an endless looking forward — without much chance for intellectual supervision.

The problem may be in the way we try to tell things now. Shattered by the Moderns, turned inward then toward surface and materiality, molested by countless experiments, and finally totally deconstructed, the angry and humiliated artistic form limps along. . . .

We feel a certain intellectual shyness about discussing *its* condition. Not unlike politics, there is an air about *it* of total defeat — rejected by popular culture siding with the merchants, abandoned by the educated middle-classes gripped in the sentimentality of post-modernism, betrayed by the rebels who just want to clean the table for another “new.”

What can be done?

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It is tempting to imagine that only a deliberate conspiracy could have evoked such a strong cultural bias as has emerged with the digital computer. Its disproportional cultural advantage lay in the organization, permutation, and expression of the code. More than any other man-made product, the digital code exhibits an unusual affinity for formulating diverse types of dynamic expression, including those most human-like. The ability of The Machine to represent such generically distinct activities as speech, musical expression, and gestures, and do all that with ease and clear significance, inspires one to draw an historical parallel to the invention of the alphabet.

By now, this Machinery is surrounded at all times by its subordinate devices, sycophants which faithfully report on the *outside* world through the use of complementary machine and human protocol. Consequently, The Machine's strategy comes ever closer to something familiar and recognizable. Which is unlike the invention and proliferation of say, for example, film in every aspect. The current overwhelming presence of media in an active state, capable of instant intervention, creates historically a radically different environment from what has ever been before. Therefore, it seems appropriate to look at the representation of space as a general cultural project.

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Ordinarily, images made by computers do not reflect the experiences of the social sciences. Computer images more often reflect subjects related to the problems of exact sciences. Also, they can and occasionally do present alternate imaging principles. But the main interest of all science lies in observation of The Event, not in the composition of an esthetic frame for it. However, we must keep in mind that the camera (*obscura*) principle with its frame may have an everlasting grip on our consciousness. After all, the mind — the portable home of our own perceptual mechanism — is informed by the very same camera principle with its two channels of retinal input.

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prescriptive power of film disappears and the viewer's participation enters into the narrative relationship.

It is in fact the author's prescriptive choice that constitutes the extraordinary power of film. The unique way of telling, the least trivial viewpoints, the least necessary choices, these are the devices that make authors' films interesting. It is not anything that a fashionable democracy would tolerate, being elitist and quite discriminating.

One must realize that the benefit of *The Machine* is not in the new image but in the new space it offers. Whenever one attempts to tell something cinematically through the computer, one experiences a certain deficiency in grasping and presenting the totality of the abstract space offered. As in the emergence of filmic syntax (when the necessity of splice resulted in the invention of the "cut") the abstract space of the computer forces itself upon the way of telling. It is the rules of digital space — its transitions and transformations — which become the driving force of an automatic syntactic evolution in this newly acquired dramatic space.

In the jargon of the computer, terms like "shot" or "scene" are replaced by descriptions of "a world" or "worlds" giving some suggestion to the spatial continuity.

In a multidimensional space, a single shot is no longer practical. Each "shot" in a computer memory is already constructed as an environment, as a scene. A single shot/scene in a computer implies more than one possibility, where many directions can be selected from the design of a scene, many narrative vectors can be pointed in many directions.

A "shot" in film indicates a discrete viewpoint. Its narrative purpose is to eliminate other possible views. Whereas, a "world" in the computer contains the infinity of undivided space, not yet dissected into the viewpoints of the narrative progression.

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What is it that forces us to define this "new" trend? Is it our own desire to ambush the viewer into a spectacle from which no defense is practical? Have we arrived at the moment when he or she, the viewer, has finally become receptive to a new kind of collaboration — offering us a helping hand? Is the moment upon us when a new genre is being born? Or are we in need of entirely opposite reasoning?

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Perhaps this new space offered is "a non-centric" space with no coordinates. Accordingly, this description may apply to the narrative exploration of such a space. Non-centric. No singular pathway becomes feasible, or final. The author becomes an ancient guide with his instincts and worn out charts, no more secure or sure footed than the viewer.

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The necessary condition of non-centric space is a total removal of gravity. There is no regard to traditional directionality: no south, north, up or down. Without a destination, the space in front has no particular priority except when the space behind becomes a danger zone, keenly watched in the rear view mirror. The vector of any significance is The Event. Even if nothing happens for a very long time, the story such space tells when it finally begins telling may be minimal but exciting. A single vector pointing toward an event.

But what is the event? The event is *now*. Listen carefully: Every point in space generates a now. The now is a spherical event, it expands and propagates, emitted from every point in space. It is a continuous process. There is always a new now. The space is packed with ever expanding nows. And in no time the whole space is a dense interference pattern of nows!

The event stands and falls on one precondition: The generation of now is to be a synchronous event: Even points light years apart must generate now now!

— Woody Vasulka, in Frankfurt, December 1992

Even taken rather superficially, our cultural benefit from the experience of film is quite remarkable. Appearing at the moment of a certain cultural culmination where music and literature had measurably advanced the esthetic norm, film rapidly challenged the status of literacy by driving a wedge between the perceived and the experienced. The mere mastery of composition through its syntax — the montage, with its ways of telling frame by frame — reflected back on the hegemony of the written word. Before film collapsed into the arms of the merchants, its cultural oligarchy had changed our minds perhaps forever. It even managed to experience a time of relative stability — an advantage no other form of media has experienced since.

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The perception of dynamic processes depends on our ability to continuously recall previous events. For example, in music, a continuous state of evocation informs us of the structure of the composition and of any short or long term changes. So it is in the perception of film. On a micro level, a succeeding frame is compared with the preceding one, the difference extracted, and a "kine" (a term meaning a "quantum of filmic change" coined by the German artist/scholar Werner Nekes) is realized as a motion step. The succession of "kines" gives a perceived continuity. On the compositional macro level, each scene brings a facet of the filmic space into our longer term visual memory, gradually piecing together the totality of the suggested space. This ability to construct the filmic space in our consciousness is one of the most amazing feats of machine-to-human cooperation. It can achieve the most far-fetched expansion of filmic spatial synthesis in our minds, provided the inspired and provocative narrative context is there.

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There is no very convincing method for entering a multidimensional space from the world of light and shadow. The multidimensional image/object is preconditioned on a continuity of its surfaces, regardless of the illumination. The complete set of information must be significant from all directions. This is again unlike film, where once the frame has been selected and recorded, the space continuity can be discarded.

Cinematic space is operated on two opposite sets of vectors. If space were to be represented by a sphere, then a first set of cinematic vectors looks at the point in the middle from all possible angles. The other set of vectors looks at the surface of the sphere from a point on the inside — again an infinite choice. The vectors have specific limitations: they may not penetrate existing surfaces and their operation is conditioned on the presence of light. Pragmatically, the cinema chooses a largely reduced set of total vectors — those that are psychologically adaptable. The factors of cinematic reduction are those that are related to the horizontality and verticality of the environment (such as horizon and trees) — based on gravity and the position of human sight. This reduction results in a specific zone of the sphere, frequented and employed as a syntactic source: the area where the camera find itself most frequently.

Digital space therefore has no generic method for looking at the world like a camera does with its pinhole/lens apparatus. Digital space is a constructed space, where each component, aspect, concept and surface must be defined mathematically. The world inside a computer is but a model of reality *as if* seen through the eye of a camera.

Digital space could be imagined to incorporate film's heritage except for the image itself, which in cinema is strictly a property of photography. However, all other devices of the computer such as image surface, representation through optics, and conditions of light and perspective, are constructed into a synthetic camera, clearly inseparable from the traditional heritage of film. In this context, no viewpoint is ever discarded, the internal space is open to a continuous rearrangement. Access to a selection of views and narrative vectors is infinitely available, not only to the author, but under certain strategies, to the viewer as well. Once the author constructs and organizes a digital space, the viewer can take charge of the narrative. It is at this point, that the