

midterm, fall '02

the history of artifice and simulation  
norman klein

response : scott nazarian

'internal relativity'

Global culture is in a state of narrative anarchy. West or east, it doesn't matter – the phosphorescent glow of the vacuum tube a kind of imaginary daylight, bathing we somnambulant spectators, already awash in conspicuous consumerism, in the sugar plum fancies of our every desire. Before we can address this particular state of things directly, though, it seems important to note the divergent lived (and historical) experiences of eastern and western cultures, and make a few general observations. The culturally denigrating effects of this anarchy are most clearly seen in western societies, the essential difference being, it seems, that eastern philosophies haven't labored, millennially, under Aristotelian rules of order; ideas of Cartesian space and mind seem to hold no sway over the weltering masses of, say, Asia Minor. The spectacle of consumer capitalism, having conditioned its western subjects with anxious fragmentation and helpless decontrol, will very likely find lurking on the subcontinent a beast of an entirely different order. Here is a populace who, through the twin affects of age old religious tradition and unyielding overpopulation, have been immunized against the viral march of what Marshall McLuhan called the 'mosaic consciousness'.<sup>01</sup> But 'immunization' is not quite the correct descriptor in this case. The rich phantasmagoria of eastern religions has immersed these peoples' imaginations, from birth, in representations of infinity and, moreover, 'flux'; may we assume, then, a more supple mind that may simply resist the false spectacle of commodification that the west has to offer? Indeed, it may turn that spectacle on its head and bring about a profound change in the dominant modes of representation. Consider that the average modern western intelligence struggles with the structures of meaning precisely because these grids<sup>02</sup> are endlessly overlapping, forming new grids, forming non-grids; memetic anarchy should be a given yet our western consciousness chafes for lack of a linear order. Not so the Hindi Brahmin or the Buddhist factory floor worker? The eastern cultural narratives of hyper-density, hyper-mortality and hyper-divinity have conspired to make commonplace a contemplation of the sublime and have encouraged a resilience to the various simulations and sublimations of media. Yet despite these essential differences, one common narrative of eastern and western cultures is surely the problem of memory. If time and space have different meanings for east and west, memory remains unmoved. Memory lies outside of such considerations yet binds them with its ability to alter perception and the recall of perception. In concert with its antithesis, 'forgetting', memory would seem to be a necessarily incomplete narrative that allows us all some respite

from the lurid horror-show of the world at large, no matter our cultural origins. And there is another narrative, perhaps the most relevant to the discussion of the cultural importance of memory and forgetting, particularly in western thought and culture, still to be considered – the narrative of the computer.

The 'surrogate' memory systems of the computer and its affiliate narratives are too complete. Indeed, the 'balm and release of forgetting'<sup>03</sup> is being slowly displaced by a sinister and fragmented mnemonic spectacle<sup>04</sup> of sublime (sensory) overexposure. That is to say, if we consider that there is no 'punch line' in the vernacular of computer use and subsequent network access and hyper-linking, one is never *finished*. In fact, as network dwellers our narrative intelligence is in thrall to a state of perpetual denouement or *infinite finish*.

Memory and event have been broken down - microtised - to the extent that we have to relearn *closure* on a moment-by-moment basis. In turn, the attempt to apply this closure indefinitely to our own intimate sensorium creates a disquieting sense of constant 'waking' or being 'turned-on-to' an ever-increasing procession of representations. This phantasmagoria is driving us mad. We need a new kind of cartographic 'imaginary' (to borrow from Norman Klein's lexicon of representations) to help us navigate this mosaic with our identities intact. Memory is not what we think but rather how we begin to feel. It's a continuous starting point, overwritten now and now and now - what kind of narrative can withstand such an assault? How can memory sustain such vast input and incessant recall?

## A THEORY OF MEMORY

Our body shapes memory. Memory might, in fact, be nothing more than a metabolic function. Consider: I once heard it remarked that it was possible, as one got older, to 'encapsulate' one's recounting of the activities of each passing decade; the further back you went, the more severe the encapsulation. Events described verbosely at present, might, 10 years later, be summarized in a single sentence. Is this reduction merely a function of psychological prioritization, the necessary mechanics of our mental faculties; or perhaps it indicates a 'loss' of those faculties. Or, if our memories, and indeed our whole psyches, are founded on atomic principles, molecular 'reactions' and cellular / endocrynological chemical interactions, then perhaps the phenomenon represents a unique form of organic 'compression', in which the memory of experience is 'folded'

in on itself to make room for 'current events' and other processes. In computing terminology, this might be called 'optimization'. Taking this a step further – on the premise that the psyche provides the foundation for the senses and perceptions and that the psyche is indeed a physical (brain) or atomic (chemical) function and that memory is the medium through which time is recorded or tracked by the psyche, can we suppose that the metabolic-functions of the human body have a measurable impact on the perception of time? Much the same way that the General Theory of Relativity describes the perception of time from the perspective of bodies in motion, can each individuals' perception of time be affected by the rate of their body's metabolism?

We are merely trying to describe here how, in general, it feels to experience the passage of time as an individual. Einstein's theory clearly (or not, depending on what you believe) is dealing with external bodies in motion and how we perceive others movement through time and space. But our internal motions have an undeniable impact on our perceptions of those selfsame external bodies – sadness, joy, anger, rage - emotions: all these effect our body chemistry and thus our metabolic rate, or rate of internal motion and thus our relative perception of time. It is this very internal relativity that describes our lived experience and that anchors our sense that we inhabit our bodies from the inside. So, then, where does this proprioception end and the world begin? What are the external agents, as we perform actions in the world, of our narrative excursion into experience itself?

The vessels of memory outside us are myriad. Human beings, sharing similar longings it seems, have mastered the trick of imagistic transference – the ability to encode desire and experience into the fiber of external representations. Architecture is the most immediate example that comes to mind, as well as the actors and spaces of the cinema – in particular, those of the science fiction cinema. Critic Janet Staiger observes the 'labyrinthine character of space'<sup>05</sup> in the 'future noir' of *Blade Runner*, *Brazil* and *Max Headroom*:

"For [Fredric Jameson] we are in a new 'hyperspace' – a 'disjunction' finally exists 'between the body and its built environment...[which] can stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communication network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects'." <sup>06</sup>

One might imagine that the channel and groove of these labyrinthine cityscapes are very like the folds of a brain, holding only traces of a missing script, something that we are longing for. Mr.

Jameson indirectly points out that what we are actually longing for is our identity, that most basic of scripts. We seem to have invested a great deal in the idea of our future selves, perhaps so much so that we have trouble identifying our present selves within the framework of lived experience. In other words, we don't know what is inside or outside of our heads because we've stashed vast portions of our desire into spaces *without* scripts, like locking ourselves out of a room for which we presently have no key.

It is in the context of this alienation that we are so in thrall to the spectacle of mosaic society and its promise of enlightened hyper-awareness. And our companion guide to this madness is none other than the 'dynamic nonconscious'07 of the computer, a device for which the only defining referent is the power button. The computer is perhaps the ultimate vessel in which to invest our memory and desire – it mirrors both with the marksmanship of a ventriloquist's dummy. In relying on such a guide, however, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the infinite appetites of the mosaic consciousness. By beginning to 'think in mosaic'08, we are talking about being able to map, cognitively, the topologies of informational surfaces in multiform. But at what price do we gain this ability? The computer is, after all, only a prosthetic device, capable only of amplifying our nascent cartographic skills and storing the results. The narrative grid offered by the computer is strictly rhetorical in that it is incapable of independently generating new narrative directions; in this way, the computer is said to be *nonconscious*. The *dynamic* aspect of the computer can be realized in its application as an 'aperture of desire'09, the lens through which we are able to grok the intricacies of the mosaic. Yet, while we may be able to apply the computer's binary genius to the task of decoding the trace patterns we find there, we must resist the feeling of metonymic indifference that derives, part and parcel, from the essence of the computer-as-prosthetic-device. We should be wary of allowing the computer to play too great a role in the mediation of our lived experience, given its lack of internal paradox. Because of this, as much as we may feel that we need its narrative buffer, the computer will continue to instill a fierce sense of disengagement in paradoxical creatures such as ourselves. The technological 'sublime' is, at best, not even a close emulation of our own experience.

#### MEMORY AND THE SUBLIME

Our sense of disengaged desire is the new 'forgetting'. We're under a kind of anesthesia that negates longing for any kind of meaning and we don't know what to desire any more. Yet, again,

it is precisely this sense of alienation that humanizes us and transcends technological affect, to a degree. Our internal paradox is a pure manifestation of the sublime that is deeply affected by the lack of internal and external boundaries with mosaic media. What is more, the present glut of simulated desire seems to have overridden our 'symbolic' selves in favor of a more 'imaginary' state.<sup>10</sup> Critic Scott Bukatman deftly outlines our relationship with the sublime:

"The sublime was constituted through the combined sensations of astonishment, terror and awe that occur through the revelation of a power greater by far than the human. Those commingled sensations result from the rhetorical construction of grandeur (either grandly large or small) and the infinite. The object of sublime rhetoric is often not fully available to vision or description: uniformity (the similarity of all parts) and succession (a sense that the object extends on and on) characterize this 'obscurity'. The sublime initiates a crisis in the subject by disrupting the customary cognized relationship between subject and external reality. It threatens human thought, habitual signifying systems, and finally, human prowess: 'the mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused'."<sup>11</sup>

And he goes on to say that,

"The universe is without end - it confounds us ; but the rhetoric of the sublime paradoxically permits an understanding of these sensory and conceptual limits. The rhetorical threat posed by the sublime is finally, then, not really much of a threat."<sup>12</sup>

In unpacking Bukatman's description of the sublime, we become aware of two things in particular. First, the 'object' to which he is referring is the 'world'. The task to which we set our minds in trying to encompass what can't be encompassed is the flashpoint of our internal crisis. 'Obscurity', in this case, implies 'anxiety'. Second, though our limited range of signification ultimately reasserts itself by 'containing' our infinite contemplation of the sublime, we are left staring blankly at a kind of 'horizon of expectation'<sup>13</sup>, again trying to remember the details of deeper meaning and perhaps also the coordinates of our identity within that space. The metonymy of the computer induces the trance wherein this horizon becomes visible. Our involvement in the task of scanning this point of reference becomes irresistible – the distance between us and the horizon line represents an anamorphosis of memory and desire. The emotional and informational topography of this stretched perspective could, in fact, be said to describe our idealized future selves. Finally, it is the tension between the external mosaic and this internal perspective that accelerates us into the present state of narrative anarchy and anxious ambivalence, the 'state of blur'.<sup>14</sup>

Critic Roger Shattuck, on the writing of Proust, gives us this observation:

“...the two complementary aspects of time: its action of forever replacing one moment with another which extinguishes the last, the destructive aspect; and its action of sustaining certain moments by anticipation or prolongation or recollection, its creative aspect.”<sup>15</sup>

It would appear that in our cultural present we have in our possession technologies capable of sustaining this creative aspect of time indefinitely – or at least in simulation. There is a confusion that arises when the simulation is switched off and we find ourselves stranded in a place with no referent, deposited into the actual passage of time, the horizon of memory all around and oblivion behind. We need to build a more robust internal paradox, somehow, that would empower us to master the infinite appetites of the mosaic consciousness without the surrogacy of the computer. Spiritual practice comes to mind as a good example of the kind of immersive, emotional narrative needed to fortify us against the shocks of our present environment. Even the sublime has a chemistry, an internal metabolic, however obscure. We need to get in touch with this external paradox directly, rather than through the fractured agents of mosaic media, if we are to create meaningful boundaries. Perhaps, ultimately, through some prolonged period of immersion within the state of blur, we may find that our powers of ‘deep focus’, our native ability to discern the signal from the noise, will have been enhanced, like the sense of smell that sharpens in the blind.

#### FOOTNOTES

01, 08 [Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man](#) (Marshall McLuhan , 1964)

02, 07 [Snap to Grid](#) (Peter Lunenfeld, 2001)

03 [Where Is Forgetting Located](#) (Norman Klein, 1995)

04 [The Society of the Spectacle](#) (Guy Debord, 1967)

05-06 [Future Noir: Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities](#) (Janet Staiger, 1988)

09, 13-14 attributed to Norman Klein’s general theory of memory

10 attributed to Lacan’s theory of The Four Stages

11-12 [The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime](#) ( Scott Bukatman, 1995)

15 [Proust’s Binoculars](#) (Richard Shattuck, 1962)